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ABSTRACT

The Sudbury Valley School was founded in 1968 by a group of Massachusetts parents who felt that a child is a person, worthy of full respect as a human being. It was intended that a nurturing environment be created in which the children themselves chose what they wished to do and scheduled their time. Democracy was a cornerstone of the school's philosophy, and led to everyone at the school, without exception, having a voice in running the school. Accordingly, parent participation was built into the school structure. Put together in response to requests for background material on the school, this book is a collection of essays discussing various aspects of the school's educational philosophy and vignettes illustrating its atmosphere. The 29 essays address issues such as back to basics, how and what children learn at Sudbury, what children do not learn at Sudbury, learning to trust oneself, reverence for life, the art of doing nothing, mixed-age grouping, how the school is governed, school meetings, myths about democracy, teaching justice through experience, discipline, the nature of sports at Sudbury, and being true to oneself. (TD)

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The
Sudbury Valley School
Experience

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Sudbury Valley School Press

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The Sudbury Valley School Experience

Third Edition

with photographs by Michael Greenberg,
Andrew Brilliant and Carol Palmer

Sudbury Valley School Press
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Contents

Introduction 1
Back to Basics 6
What Children Don't Learn at SVS 17
How and What Do Children Learn at SVS? 21
What do Students Choose? 38
A New Look at Learning 41
On the Nature of Sports at SVS and the Limitations of Language in Describing SVS to the World 62
Reverence for all Life 69
Learning to Trust Oneself 72
The Little Girl Who Taught Me a Big Lesson 78
The Art of Doing Nothing 81
Wrong Questions, Wrong Answers 87
Do People Learn From Courses? 90
A Moment of Insight 100
When does a Person Make Good Use of His Time? 103
Doing "Nothing" at School: A Lesson from History 113
Snapshots 119
Sudbury Valley's Secret Weapon: Allowing People of Different Ages to Mix Freely at School 121

The Beech Tree 137
How the School is Governed;
Who Cares? 140
When You Think of the School Meeting,
What Passes Through Your Mind? 146
Five Myths about Democracy 149
Subtleties of a Democratic School 158
The Silent Factor 178
Teaching Justice through Experience 182
SVS Glimpses 186
On Law and Order 190
"When You Were Young";
A True Story 203
To Thyself Be True 206
A School for Today 209

Introduction

The time was 1967. A small group of parents living in the Greater Framingham area had been hunting all over the country for a school that met our requirements. We had travelled far and wide, visited and read about all sorts of places — and had come up empty-handed.

The main thing we all had in common was a deep conviction that the existing educational system would do our children irreparable harm. We felt we *had* to do whatever was necessary to provide the kind of environment we wished our children to have.

So it was that Sudbury Valley School was founded in 1968.

The starting point for all our thinking was the apparently revolutionary idea that a child is a *person*, worthy of full respect as a human being. These are simple words with devastatingly complex consequences, chief of which is that the child's agenda for its own life is as important as anyone else's agenda — parents, family, friends, or even the community. In the school we wanted for our children, their inner needs would have to be given priority in their education at every point.

As a practical matter, this meant that all of our children's activities at school would have to be launched on their own initiative. There could be no externally imposed curriculum, no arbitrary requirements dictating what they should do with themselves. The school had to be a nurturing environment in which the children themselves choose what they wish to do and schedule their time.

Personal respect also had to be the foundation of our children's process of socialization. This led us directly to the concept of democracy as an institutional imperative. Democracy alone is built on the solid foundation of equal respect for all members of the community, and for their ideas and hopes. And so it became a cornerstone of our philosophy to give everyone at school, without exception, a full and equal voice in running the school.

An interesting feature of this respect, when extended to all members of the school community, had to do with out attitude toward parents. So many educators viewed parents as a nuisance at best, a downright menace at worst. This did not seem right to us, mostly because we were founding a school primarily *as* parents! Any way we looked at it, parents definitely had a place in children's education. From the beginning, we held to this belief, and structured the school accordingly.

This book is a collection of selected essays and short pieces written about the school over the years. They were chosen for their relevance to the current school scene, and for their ability to convey an understanding of what Sudbury Valley School is all about.

The book was put together in response to a need, frequently stated by visitors, prospective enrollees, and educators. We have often been asked for more background material on various aspects of the school. Although the material was available, it was scattered through dozens of publications, most of them issues of our Newsletter, which is published approximately eight times a year. Some minor editorial changes have been made in transcribing these writings from their original sources, in order to make the material more readable and consistent with current school usage.

Perhaps the best way to open the book is with an excerpt from a recent school catalog. Entitled "A Typical Day...A Typical Year", it says:

> *Even after reading and hearing about the school, and often even after visiting, many people still wonder and ask what a "typical day" is like at school, both for students and for staff. It often comes as a surprise that we have so much trouble responding to such a question.*
>
> *Our problem is twofold: first, people at school are so different from each other, that no two of them ever do the same thing, at least not for long. Second, there is such total freedom to use time that each person often varies his activities from day to day, or week to week, or month to month.*
>
> *The variety is truly amazing — until you realize that in the world outside of schools, chances are that any group of people not preselected will show just as many differences. At Sudbury Valley, we see just about everything. One person will settle into a perfectly predictable pattern for months on end, always*

> *doing the same things in the same sequence at the same times — and then suddenly change to another predictable pattern. Another person will, at totally unpredictable times, be doing something else each time. Another person will go on a series of short term binges — a few intensive weeks (or months) of this, followed by a few intensive weeks (or months) of that.*
>
> *Some people play all day. Some people talk all day. Some people paint or study or cook all day. Some people do a little of each of these things, according to some schedule they have for themselves. Some come early and leave early, some come late and leave late. One week you are likely to find many people at school by opening time, and a bustling school soon after. The next week the school may be quiet until mid-morning.*
>
> *Time assumes a different aspect at Sudbury Valley. Here there are no bells, no periods, no terms, no grades, no "freshman," no "sophomores," no "juniors," no "seniors"; no "preschoolers," no "post-graduates." Time belongs to each student in a very personal sense. Each student learns to understand and work with his own unique internal rhythm, pace, and speed. No one is a fast learner, no one a slow learner. All have in common the quest for a personal identity that is whole, and individual, and that, once found, makes all reference to time seem trivial.*

And that is the heart of the matter. By combining absolute respect for self with a deep sense of community, Sudbury Valley has put into practice ideals we have long struggled for. It is the stuff our dreams were made of, brought to life.

The Sudbury Valley School Press

Back to Basics

Daniel Greenberg

Why go to school?

For people who like to think through the important questions in life for themselves, Sudbury Valley stands as a challenge to the accepted answers.

Intellectual basics

The first phrase that pops into everyone's mind is: "We go to school to learn." That's the intellectual goal. It comes before all the others. So much so, that "getting an education " has come to mean "learning" — a bit narrow, to be sure, but it gets the priorities clear.

Then why don't people learn more in schools today? Why all the complaints? Why the seemingly limitless expenditures just to tread water, let alone to progress?

The answer is embarrassingly simple. Schools today are institutions in which "learning" is taken to mean "being taught." You want people to learn? Teach them! You want them to learn more? Teach them more! And more! Work them harder. Drill them longer.

But learning is a process you do, not a process that is done to you! That is true of everyone. It's basic.

What makes people learn? Funny anyone should ask. Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle started his most important book with the universally accepted answer: "Human beings are naturally curious." Descartes put it slightly differently, also at the beginning of his major work: "I think, therefore I am." Learning, thinking, actively using your mind — it's the essence of being human. It's natural.

More so even than the great drives — hunger, thirst, sex. When you're engrossed in something — the key word is "engrossed" — you forget about all the other drives until they overwhelm you. Even rats do that, as was shown a long time ago.

Who would think of forcing people to eat, or drink, or have sex? (Of course, I'm not talking about people who have a specific disability that affects their drives; nor is anything I am writing here about education meant to apply to people who have specific mental impairments, which may need to be dealt with in special, clinical ways.) No one sticks people's faces in bowls of food, every hour on the hour, to be sure they'll eat; no one closets people with mates, eight periods a day, to make sure they'll couple.

Does that sound ridiculous? How much more ridiculous is it, then, to try to force people to do that which above all else comes most naturally to them! And everyone knows just how widespread this overpowering curiosity is. All books on childrearing go to great lengths to instruct parents on how to keep their little children out of things — especially once they are mobile. We don't stand around pushing our one year olds to explore. On the contrary, we tear our hair out as they tear our house apart, we seek ways to harness them, imprison them in playpens. And the older they get, the more "mischief" they get into. Did you ever deal with a ten year old? A teenager?

People go to school to learn. To learn, they must be left alone and given time. When they need help, it should be given, if we want the learning to proceed at its own natural pace. But make no mistake: if a person is determined to learn, they will overcome every obstacle and learn in spite of everything. So you don't have to help; help just makes the process a little quicker. Overcoming obstacles is one of the main activities of learning. It does no harm to leave a few.

But if you bother the person, if you insist the person stop his or her own natural learning and do instead what *you* want, between 9:00 AM and 9:50, and between 10:00 AM and 10:50 and so forth, not only won't the person learn what s/he has a passion to learn, but s/he will also hate you, hate what you are forcing upon them, and lose all taste for learning, at least temporarily.

Every time you think of a class in one of those schools out there, just imagine the teacher was forcing spinach and milk and carrots and sprouts (all those good things) down each student's throat with a giant ramrod.

Sudbury Valley leaves its students be. Period. No maybes. No exceptions. We help if we can when we are asked. We never get in the way. People come here primarily to learn. And that's what they all do, every day, all day.

Vocational basics

The nitty-gritty of going to school always comes up next, after "learning." When it comes right down to it, most people don't really give a damn what or how much they or their children learn at school, as long as they are able to have a successful career — to get a good job. That means money, status, advancement. The better the job you get, the better was the school you went to.

That's why Phillips Andover, or Harvard, rank so highly. Harvard grads start out way up the ladder in every profession. They are grateful, and when they grow up, they perpetuate this by bestowing the best they have to offer on the new Harvard grads they hire; and by giving big donations to Harvard. So it goes for Yale, Dartmouth and all the others.

So what kind of a school is most likely today, at the end of the twentieth century, to prepare a student best for a good career?

We don't really have to struggle with the answer. Everyone is writing about it. This is the post industrial age. The age of information. The age of services. The age of imagination, creativity, and entrepreneurialism. The future belongs to people who can stretch their minds to handle, mold, shape, organize, play with new material, old material, new ideas, old ideas, new facts, old facts.

These kind of activities don't take place in the average school even on an extra-curricular basis. Let alone all day.

At Sudbury Valley, these activities are, in a sense, the whole curriculum.

Does it sound far-fetched? Perhaps to an untrained ear. But history and experience are on our side. How else to explain that fact that all our graduates, barring none, who wish to go on to college and graduate school, always get in, usually to the schools of first choice? With no transcripts, no records, no reports, no oral or written school recommendations. What do college admissions officers see in these students? Why do they accept them — often, grab them? Why do these trained administrators, wallowing in 'A' averages, glowing letters from teachers, high SAT scores — why do they take Sudbury Valley grads?

Of course you know the answer, even if it is hard to admit; it runs so against the grain. These trained professionals saw in our students bright, alert, confident, creative spirits. The dream of every advanced school.

The record speaks for itself. Our students are in a huge array of professions (or schools, in the case of more recent graduates) and vocations. They are doctors, dancers, musicians, businessmen, artists, scientists, writers, auto mechanics, carpenters . . . No need to go on. You can meet them if you wish.

If a person came to me today and said, simply: "To what school should I send my child if I want to be assured that she will get the best opportunity for career advancement in the field of her choice?" I would answer without the least hesitation, "The best in the country for that purpose is Sudbury Valley." Alas, at present it is the *only* type of school in the country that does the job, with an eye to the future.

As far as vocations are concerned, Sudbury Valley has encountered Future Shock head on and overcome it. No longer is there any need to be mired in the past.

Moral basics

Now we come to a touchy subject. Schools should produce good people. That's as broad a platitude as — mother and apple pie. Obviously, we don't want schools to produce bad people.

How to produce good people? There's the rub. I daresay no one really knows the answer, at least from what I see around me. But at least we know something about the subject. We know, and have (once again) known from ancient times, the absolutely essential ingredient for moral action; the ingredient without which action is at best amoral, at worst, immoral.

The ingredient is *personal responsibility.*

All ethical behavior presupposes it. To be ethical you must be capable of choosing a path and accepting full responsibility for the choice, and for the consequences. You cannot claim to be a passive instrument of fate, of God, of other men, of *force majeure*; such a claim instantly renders all distinctions between good and evil pointless and empty. The clay that has been fashioned into the most beautiful pot in the world can lay no claim to virtue.

Ethics begins from the proposition that a human being is responsible for his or her acts. This is a given. Schools cannot change this, or diminish it. Schools can, however, either acknowledge it or deny it.

Unfortunately, virtually all schools today choose in fact to deny that students are personally responsible for their acts, even while the leaders of these schools pay lip service to the concept. The denial is threefold: schools do not permit students to choose their course of action fully; they do not permit students to embark on the course, once chosen; and they do not permit students to suffer the consequences of the course, once taken. Freedom of choice, freedom of action, freedom to bear the results of action — these are the three great freedoms that constitute personal responsibility.

It is no news that schools restrict, as a matter of fundamental policy, the freedoms of choice and action. But does it surprise you that schools restrict freedom to bear the consequences of one's actions? It shouldn't. It has become a tenet of modern education that the psyche of a student suffers harm to the extent that it is buffeted by the twin evils of adversity and failure. "Success breeds success" is the password today; encouragement, letting a person down easy, avoiding disappointing setbacks, the list goes on.

Small wonder that our schools are not noted for their ethical training. They excuse their failure by saying that moral education belongs in the home. To be sure, it does. But does that exclude it from school?

Back to basics. At Sudbury Valley, the three freedoms flourish. The buck stops with each person. Responsibility is universal, ever present, real. If you have any doubts, come and look at the school. Watch the students in action. Study the judicial system. Attend a graduation, where a student must convince an assemblage of peers that s/he is ready to be responsible for himself or herself in the community at large, just as the person has been at school.

Does Sudbury Valley produce good people? I think it does. And bad people too. But the good and the bad have exercised personal responsibility for their actions at all times, and they realize that they are fully accountable for their deeds. That's what sets Sudbury Valley apart.

Social basics

Some time ago it became fashionable to ask our schools to look after the social acclimatization of students. Teach them to get along. Rid our society of social misfits by nipping the problem in the bud, at school. Ambitious? Perhaps. But oh, how many people have struggled with reports from school about their own — or their child's — social adaptations, or lack of them! Strange, isn't it, how badly people sometimes screw up what they do? I mean, trying to socialize people is hard enough; but the schools seem almost methodically to have created ways of defeating this goal.

Take age segregation, for starters. What genius looked around and got the idea that it was meaningful to divide people sharply by age? Does such division take place naturally anywhere? In industry, do all twenty-one year old laborers work separately from twenty years olds or twenty-three year olds? In business, are there separate rooms for thirty year old executives and thirty-one year old executives? Do two year olds stay apart from one year olds and three year olds in the playgrounds? Where, where on earth was this idea conceived? Is anything more socially damaging than segregating children by year for fourteen — often eighteen — years.

Or take frequent segregation by sex, even in coed schools, for varieties of activities.

Or the vast chasm between children and adults — have you ever observed how universal it is for children not to look adults in the eye?

And now let's peek into the social situation created for children within their own age group. If the schools make it almost impossible for a twelve year old to relate in a normal human fashion to eleven year olds, thirteen year olds, adults, etc., what about other twelve year olds?

No such luck. The primary, almost exclusive mode of relationship fostered by schools among children in the same class is — competition! Cut-throat competition. The pecking order is the all-in-all. Who is better than whom, who smarter, faster, taller, handsomer — and, of course, who is worse, stupider, slower, shorter, uglier.

If ever a system was designed effectively to produce competitive, obnoxious, insecure, paranoid, social misfits, the prevailing schools have managed it.

Back to basics.

In the real world, the most important social attribute for a stable, healthy society is cooperation. In the real world, the most important form of competition is against oneself, against goals set for and by a person for that person's own achievement. In the real world, interpersonal competition for its own sake is widely recognized as pointless and destructive — yes, even in large corporations and in sports.

In the real world, and in Sudbury Valley, which is a school for the real world.

Political basics

We take it for granted that schools should foster good citizenship. Universal education in this country in particular always kept one eye sharply focused on the goal of making good Americans out of us all.

We all know what America stands for. The guiding principles were clearly laid down by our founding fathers, and steadily elaborated ever since.

This country is a democratic republic. No king, no royalty, no nobility, no inherent hierarchy, no dictator. A government of the people, by the people, for the people. In matters political, majority rule. No taxation without representation.

This country is a nation of laws. No arbitrary authority, no capricious government now giving, now taking. Due process.

This country is a people with rights. Inherent rights. Rights so dear to us that our forefathers refused to ratify the constitution without a Bill of Rights added in writing, immediately.

Knowing all this, we would expect — nay, insist (one would think) — that the schools, in training their students to contribute productively to the political stability and growth of America, would —

— be democratic and non-autocratic;

— be governed by clear rules and due process;

— be guardians of individual rights of students.

A student growing up in schools having these features would be ready to move right into society at large.

But the schools, in fact, are distinguished by the total absence of each of the three cardinal American values listed.

They are autocratic — all of them, even "progressive" schools.

They are lacking in clear guidelines and totally innocent of due process as it applies to alleged disrupters.

They do not recognize the rights of minors.

All except Sudbury Valley, which was founded on these three principles.

I think it is safe to say that the individual liberties so cherished by our ancestors and by each succeeding generation will never be really secure until our youth, throughout the crucial formative years of their minds and spirits, are nurtured in a school environment that embodies these basic American truths.

Back to basics

So you see, Sudbury Valley was started in 1968 by people who thought very hard about schools, about what schools should be and should do, about what education is all about in America today.

We went back to basics. And we stayed there. And we jealously guarded these basics against any attempts to compromise them. As we and our successors shall surely continue to stand guard.

Intellectual creativity, professional excellence, personal responsibility, social toleration, political liberty — all these are the finest creations of the human spirit. They are delicate blossoms that require constant care.

All of us who are associated with Sudbury Valley are proud to contribute to this care.

What Children Don't Learn at SVS

Hanna Greenberg

Sometimes I wonder at our courage. For it does take courage to believe that children who are allowed to spend their school days without the guidance of a prescribed curriculum will in the end be ready to enter the adult world, function in it, and succeed. The truth is that while I have always understood the shortcomings of the prevalent educational system, and felt that SVS would succeed where others failed, I often don't quite know exactly how we achieve our success. Not that this lack of knowledge disturbs me. After all, at the heart of our method is the assumption that one person cannot know what is best for another, so it follows that the children will find their way on their own without our intervention, and often without our comprehending how they did it. Nevertheless, it is sometimes possible to gain insight into the way things work around here, and thus gain more confidence in what we are doing.

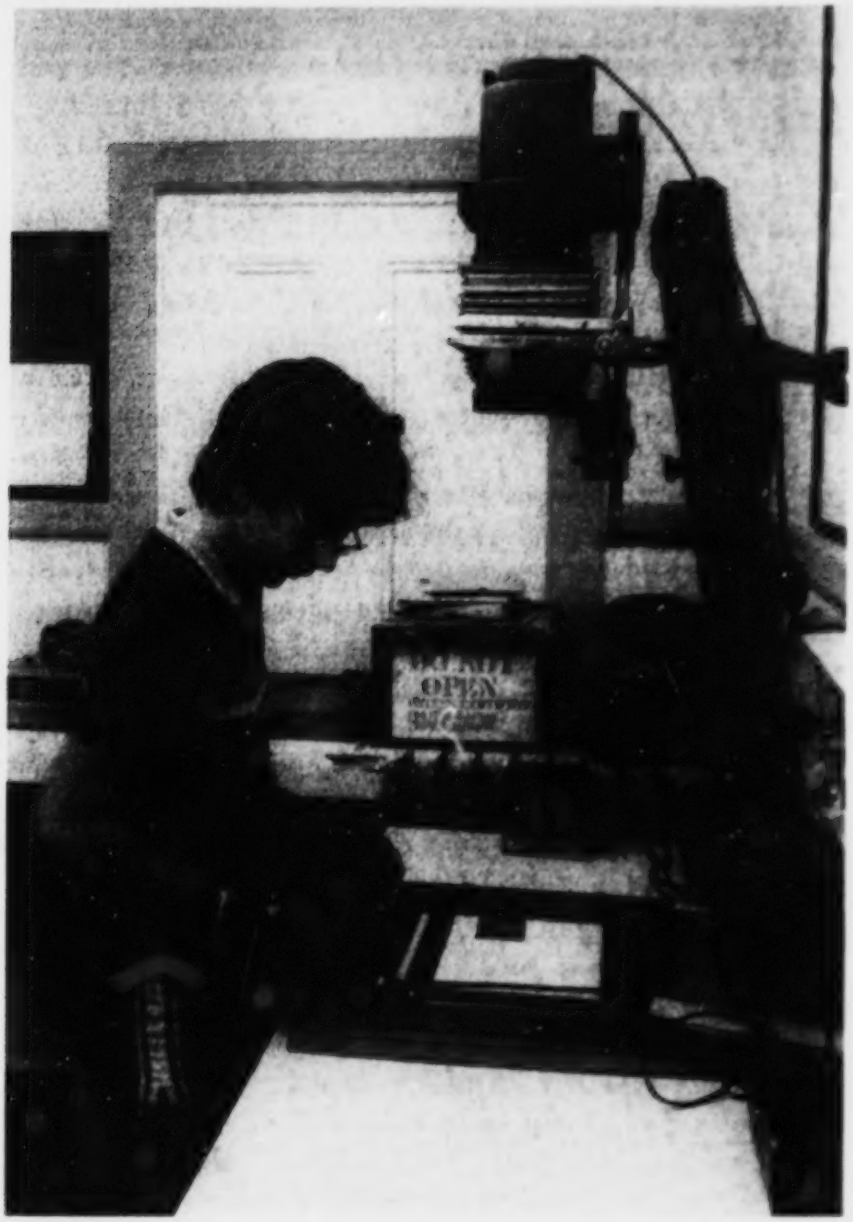
Let me give an example.

One of the most striking aspects of the school is the way children play here. Visitors are amazed to see that the school permits the children to play all day, week in week out, starting in the Fall through the Winter and into the Spring, year after year. They wonder at the "country-club atmosphere," or at the "all-day recess." But that is not what is really striking about the play at SVS. What is essentially unique is the utter seriousness, the concentration, even the passion with which the children pursue their play. For years I thought nothing of it. I attributed this to human nature, to the fact that all of us, children and adults, pursue our hobbies in this manner. It was also obvious to me that activities which we dislike doing, but which we must be engaged in out of a sense of duty, most of us do in a lackluster way, with no enthusiasm, with minimal output of feeling and imagination, with a lack of joy and, in general, in a manner calculated to conserve our energy by avoiding work as much as possible. We all know this and have always known this.

One day, however, I noticed some specific kids whom I have watched play for six years, or even longer, suddenly (that's how it seemed to me) latch on to some work with the same dedication that they applied to their play. This got me to watch other children, and I discovered this to be the case with almost all of the people who have grown up at SVS. They show a remarkable lack of skill in the art of dodging and shirking. They seem to have transferred their mode of behavior in play or fun activities to *all* their activities. When questioned, they often admit to lack of interest in certain activities they pursue because they feel they must, either to learn skills such as math or spelling, or whatever. In other instances, they take on jobs that are boring when they need to earn money and no better jobs are available. Most of the time, they still apply themselves with energy and concentration to whatever they do. They persevere at their work, take on responsibilities and are esteemed by their employers. They are also diligent and intelligent students.

Many learned papers have been written about the connection between children's games and learning. What strikes me as interesting is how children's play at SVS is related to what they *do not* learn here. They do not have to learn to adapt to activities that they do not initiate. They are innocent of the techniques that every child uses sooner or later in the average school throughout the world. Children who are forced to listen to teachings that don't answer their quests, who are forced to study material that does not seem relevant to them, who are grouped together by others who don't even know them and are forced to learn together whether they are ready or not, all use similar methods of coping. I do not have to enumerate them; every reader knows some from personal experience. Slowly the spark of life is diminished, the bright eyes dim, the questions are left unasked and the life force is wasted on coping with a suffocating environment. Bad work habits are internalized, character traits are formed that later require much effort to undo. When liberation arrives at graduation from high school it is often too late. Many persons find it hard to get enthusiastic, to galvanize their energy for work, to apply their imagination, to be creative in solving problems.

Children are born with all these qualities that we all value and reward in adults. Tragically, our schools educate our young people to lose them. At SVS we never do *teach* kids how to work hard, how to be creative, how to think for themselves. What we do is not rob them of what they knew when they were very young. We let them be, and they do the rest exquisitely all by themselves.



How and What Do Children Learn at SVS?

Daniel Greenberg

No question is raised more often about Sudbury Valley School. Somehow it's easy to accept the fact that the school is a house, or that there are no classrooms. Everybody knows that some of the best progressive schools have moved around the furniture and tried to make things a little less formal, so the fact that there aren't formal study rooms may seem a little peculiar, but it's not that bizarre. What is strange indeed is that nobody seems to be "doing" anything. The school seems to be in perpetual recess.

A little historical perspective can help in grappling with this question. Before we started the school, every discussion of our educational philosophy was a presentation of a hypothetical idea. We would go before a group and say this, that, and the other thing, and people would listen skeptically and present us with one unanswerable objection: "It won't work!" What could we say? That it *will* work? We were sure that it would work, but we couldn't say it *did* work.

We know now that it does work. The problem we have now is one not of proving that it will work, but of trying somehow to explain *why* it works when it feels like it shouldn't. That's a very different problem, a nice kind of problem.

We've had a great many graduates since 1970, and others who left for one reason or another without graduating, so we have a lot of experience with students who have been here and then gone on to the "outside world." They're in the professions, in the arts, in business; they've gone to colleges and to trade schools. Everyone who wanted to go to college got into college. Most got into the college of their first choice. People would ask, "How are you going to get them into college? They have no grades, no recommendations." It's totally against our principles to write recommendations. The college admissions applications ask for an evaluation of the students: what percentile of the class are they in, what their personal characteristics are — pages and pages to fill out about the student's character, performance, and abilities and so forth. Initially people would say, "If you don't fill that out, how is the student ever going to get into college?" We've never filled one out in all the years. We have a form letter which explains the school and our philosophy and why we don't fill out the forms. Basically we say, "You people in the admissions office are going to have to look at this student and figure out for yourselves whether he or she is somebody who ought to go to your school. We're not going to do the work for you."

As it turned out, what we predicted actually happened. Admissions people in colleges are jaded. They get a thousand applications, and every one of them is the same. There is hardly a student who has applied to college who isn't "the best," or who doesn't have twenty letters of recommendation from twenty different teachers who say, "Johnny is absolutely the finest student I've ever had in my twenty years of teaching." What is one to do? So the admissions people sit there, day in and day out, looking through all kinds of garbage, and than all of a sudden somebody applies who has none of these papers. The applicant says, "I want to come here. I know I'm the right person for your school, and I know why I want to be here." And the admissions people can hardly believe their ears. Usually, the better the school, the better the chances are of getting in.

That's just one experience we've had with our graduates. There are a lot of things we can say now. For example, we have never had a case of dyslexia. You read that 10-15% of the population have dyslexia. But we haven't had one such instance. It could be an accident. The students who attended SVS might just happen not to be in that 10-15%. But it doesn't work that way. There's no pre-selection of non-dyslexic people in this place. We haven't had dyslexia because we haven't brought it about.

What we have had is children who have started reading at a very wide range of ages. We've had some who started at four or five (that's what everybody likes to hear) and we've had others who started at nine, ten, even later. When you look at a person who isn't reading at the age of eight, you know that person in a standard school setting would be put in a remedial reading class and subjected to enormous pressures. But if you stay your course, as we have stayed our course over the years, and you leave that person alone and let them develop at their own pace, the "miracle" always seems to happen. By the time they leave, you wouldn't know the difference between those who started reading at four and those who started at eleven.

The point is that today we can relax a little when we talk about the subject of learning at SVS. Hundreds of people have been through the school, and it works — despite the fact that it's a "perpetual recess." They go out into the real world. They make it. They do well. They're well-adjusted and they're not behind. With that settled, we can examine a bit more closely what's going on and why.

The real problem is that it's hard to tell what learning is going on, or how it is happening. Learning as a psychological activity is something truly difficult to get a handle on. We know very little about the process. There are a lot of theories, but none of them have stood the test of time and few are based on hard data or hypotheses that are supportable. Most educators know this. In order to cover up for this, in order to make up for the feeling of inadequacy in confronting a process that we don't really comprehend, we do what modern man always does. We label something "learning" and measure it. Then we're comfortable, because at least then we have the feeling that we have a grasp on the problem. We don't really follow the process, but in lieu of a profound understanding of what's going on, we find something and say, "Let's declare that to be learning, by consensus. Then we can measure it and put it out of our minds." This is basically what the entire educational system the world over has done: quantify learning by breaking it up into measurable pieces — curricula, courses, hours, tests, and grades. Take any subject you want: for example, American history. American history is a tremendous field. What does it mean to learn American history? To deal with this, educators get a book — Commager, Morrison, whatever, on the subject. Then they line up thirty people, put them in a class, and declare, "You're now going to learn American history. Every day you will read a certain number of pages of the book, discuss them, and then take tests on them to make sure you know what you've read." In this way, they can measure what is going on. They can say that during the year, you read 450 pages of American history by an eminent writer and historian, as a result of which you "learned" American history. It feels so comfortable that you never really want to stop to ask, "Is anybody in this course *learning* American history? Does anybody have an overview of the subject? Has anybody internalized it? Does anybody remember three years later what they've supposedly learned?"

The best example of this I ever saw was with one of the most eminent physicists of our time, who taught a course in a subject called Statistical Mechanics. He was a Nobel Laureate who certainly knew his subject. He walked into class the first day, walked up to the blackboard, wrote the expression *e-H/KT*, and started writing a mass of complex formulas. I went to him after class and said, "I understand the math and the derivations, but tell me something. I've read a lot of books on *e-H/KT* and I don't understand where it comes from." He looked at me and said, "I don't want to deal with that. For me it starts with the mathematical expression *e-H/KT* and it goes from there. That's all I want to know about." Even though he was teaching advanced graduate students, he was in the perfect tradition of education. He wanted something he could put his hands on and not worry about the rest, because the rest was too subtle and too complex to handle and it didn't have a place in any organized, quantifiable system.

How did we get to the point where it was so terribly important for us to quantify learning? It wasn't always that way. I think it's worth a thumbnail sketch of the history of education to understand how we got there.

For most of history there were three quite distinct forms of education. They had a great deal to do with social class. There was education for a small cultural elite, extremely stylized and formal. People made up their minds what it meant to be a "cultured person." For example, in 19th century Europe, it was cultured to know French, piano, singing, Latin, Greek, and so on. There was a universal consensus. Thus it came about that the entire cultural aristocracy of Russia spoke French; many didn't even speak Russian. And everybody learned the piano. It must have been torture to go to somebody's home for dinner, because no matter where you went, after dinner someone would sit at the piano and give a recital, and the guests might be expected to join with them and sing. So, too, with Greek and Latin. Utterly useless.

One of the best stories about this is told by Winston Churchill, concerning his own childhood. He was a total failure in school. To get into his exclusive high school, he had to go through the formality of an entrance exam. Of course, he knew (as did everybody else) that it made no difference, since he'd end up being accepted anyway, as one of the direct descendants of the Duke of Marlborough. But there he was, faced with an entrance exam in Greek and Latin. He looked at the page for an hour and finally handed in an empty paper with his signature on it and a big smudge of ink. They gave up on him entirely and placed him in the dummie's class, which learned *English*! So it happened that Winston Churchill spent his entire high school career studying English literature, whereas all the successful "cultured" people learned Greek and Latin. It hardly needs mention that Churchill ended up being one of the finest stylists in the English language in the twentieth century.

The moral is very simple. That type of education was a sheer convention. Everybody knew it for what it was. It was tailored for the elite, and one conformed to it simply to look right. That's something that was universal throughout history, and it all but died at the end of the nineteenth century, with the death of the elite aristocracy as a class. No matter how much they might try to keep themselves going, they're gone, and most of their forms are gone.

The second kind of education that prevailed throughout history was one that applied to only a few people: professional training for certain specific professions. People who were destined to go into a profession were taken at a young age and for several years put through a rigorous training directed solely at the accomplishment of that profession's aims. An example of this is the priesthood. In every religion, people who were to be priests would study the philosophy, theology, mysteries, the rituals of that religion. It was a functional education and it was only useful for a very small number of people at any time.

The great majority of people were subject to a third educational process, namely learning by apprenticeship. This meant learning from the model of accomplished people in the pursuit that they wanted to follow. The nature of the pursuit made no difference. If one wanted to be a carpenter, one was apprenticed to a carpenter. If you wanted to be a doctor, you were apprenticed to a doctor; if a lawyer, apprenticed to a lawyer; if a farmer, one worked with a farmer. It wasn't always a formal apprenticeship, but it always involved learning by working side by side with more advanced people. Often, there was a one-on-one relationship between pupil and teacher.

Good philosophers, good artisans, good musicians, good everything came out of that type of education throughout history. No doubt the world could have gone on happily with that method of education had not a striking shock intervened in the eighteenth century which threw everything out of kilter — the shock of the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution required a mass of people who were in tune with the machines they operated. Today many people, especially younger ones, have no idea what society was like two hundred, or a hundred, years ago. They can't imagine that it took a day and a half to go from Framingham to Boston. They can't comprehend how Andrew Jackson could have become the hero of New Orleans in a battle that he won over the British several weeks after the peace treaty had been signed in London ending the War of 1812. It's the same with the Industrial Revolution. Very few people realize that the kinds of machines that dominated the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century were quite different from the machines that prevail today. They were less independent, more limited, and they needed machine-like people to handle them. That was the essence of it. They needed people to perform robot-like, monotonous functions over and over again and be good at them. This created a tremendous demand on the society infrastructure for people to feed this industrial monster. Everybody went along with this demand because the end products were something everybody wanted. They brought material prosperity and made life better. But they required a tremendous effort on the part of the people.

Let me try to make this a little clearer. People who have had experience with developing countries today know that their biggest problem is to get the infrastructure in tune with society's needs. It can't be done overnight. It's a tremendous task. This was brought home to me dramatically through an experience in Israel in the late fifties. I was in Tel Aviv having lunch at a fancy hotel. All of a sudden, there emerged a bunch of waiters who looked like they were lost. Upon inquiry, I found out that they were a group from an African country who had been sent to Israel for training in tourist industries. That country's government had sent twenty or so of their best high school graduates, and in they trooped, into the dining room. It was the most tortuous lunch I ever had, because these people simply couldn't take an order. They had no idea how to do it. They weren't at all stupid. They just weren't "tuned in." All of a sudden I realized that no one stops to think about such things until they have an experience like this. We can travel from one end of the United States to the other, north, south, east and west, and we can walk into any little drug store, soda fountain, lunch room, McDonald's, anywhere in this country — there are tens of thousands of them — and there's basically the same menu on the board everywhere. We can say, "I want a club sandwich, or a BLT," and somebody stands behind the counter and yells, "BLT down!" or whatever, and somebody in the back makes it, and it comes out and writes up a check. Think about it. All over a country the size of a continent there are tens of thousands of people for whom this is a totally natural activity. They weren't born with this. It didn't come out of the blue.

It's almost unbelievable. It's the product of the infrastructure created by the Industrial Revolution. It required people who were in a sense interchangeable, just like the machines were. And it created great mobility. Who ever heard of moving in the old days? People were born in a place, and they died in the same place. And their children. And their grandchildren. Generations on end stayed in the same town. Today we feel that we're stable if we don't move for ten years. You can take a person from Kansas and stick them in Massachusetts, or from Massachusetts in Oregon — it's mind-boggling to understand what this means. People are interchangeable parts. And the Industrial Revolution is what made them that way.

The educational system responded to the requirements of the Industrial Revolution in a carefully thought out manner. Nineteenth Century educators knew what they were doing, and they were very clear on their aims. They zeroed in on the "3R's" — reading, writing, and arithmetic — as the basic necessities of the industrial machine. They needed people who could read instructions, communicate with others in a rudimentary fashion, and make the elementary calculations required in everyday work. That's how compulsory education was born, to fill a specific, narrow need, for a limited age range of pupils (basically aged six through twelve).

Within the limited goals of producing mechanical people for the industrial era, the educational system worked beautifully. Its needs and its outputs were quantifiable and measurable, boring and routine. *And it had little to do with the subject of this essay, namely, "learning".*

The tensions that arose between the requirements of the Industrial Age and the aspirations of democracy and freedom were enormous. Nowhere are they better expressed than in the writings of Jefferson, whose heart ached as he watched the industrialization of this country. Jefferson wished more than anything that America would be and would remain a rural society, because he was sure that was the only way we would ever protect our freedoms. For him, industrialization meant regimentation and autocracy. This tension between our political and moral ideals — to be free, responsible citizens, equal before the law, and equal with each other — and the rigid requirements of an economic system tore the country apart for over one hundred fifty years and remains to this day a contradictory element of our educational system. It is simply impossible to handle the fact that we treat children fundamentally as *prisoners*, in the fullest sense of the term.

I don't mean this to be a polemic, or as an attack on the schools. It is a plain political observation. Our concept of a prison and our concept of a school are analogous; in fact, almost identical. They involve restraints on the freedom of movement. They involve physical regimentation. They involve thought control. They involve obedience and punishment for disobedience. It is a commonplace that even the architecture of modern prisons and modern schools has much in common.

The great news is that these tensions don't have to exist anymore. We're now is the post-industrial era, an age that has requirements diametrically opposed to those of the earlier industrial age. Today the *worry* is that our educational system is producing human robots. People are trying to figure out what to do, because they're not getting graduates out of the schools who understand how to deal with problems independently. What's happened is that the fundamental nature of the economy has changed. Our machines are smart enough not to need mechanical people to run them. That simple fact is the essence of the post-industrial era. It means that for the future, what we need is a different educational product, almost a throwback to the kind of educational product we've had throughout history. We need people who are self-driven, self-motivated, responsible on their own, able to conduct themselves in an intelligent, creative, imaginative way.

Within this context, I would like to examine how the basic educational features of SVS fit a post-industrial democratic civilization. Most important is the element of freedom. Everyone knows coercion is counterproductive to learning. We don't really know what enhances learning; we don't know the magic button we can press to make a person learn quickly. But we know the button we can press to *prevent* a person from learning effectively: coercion. Most of the people know this from their own experience, if they face it squarely. For example, most adults have hobbies and interests that are enormously varied, but these rarely coincide with subject matter that they learned in school. They spent twelve, sixteen, even twenty years, ostensibly learning all sorts of stuff, but their real interest lay in constructing harps, sailing boats, building models, collecting stamps, anything, but hardly ever reading great books! I remember how shocked I was twenty years ago when the managing editor of a large publishing company told me that a very good seller was a book that sold 10,000 copies — 10,000 copies to 200,000,000 people! Most people don't read serious books. They'll read *Field and*

Stream because they're interested in fishing and hunting, they'll read just about anything in the areas of their interest, but they never seem to be interested in the stuff they learned in school.

The second element that's important in this school has to do with exposure. Children today are overexposed. With television, with what they see and hear around them, they're exposed by the age of six to things that their parents weren't exposed to by late adolescence. Exposure per se is the last thing to worry about. Of more concern is how to get children *away from* the relentless stimulation that is bombarding them on every side. How are they going to get a chance to sit back and think — to *contemplate*? For us at Sudbury Valley the best weapon is time. The school is set up in a way that encourages students to relax, to look inward to their own internal time and rhythm, to nurture them. If that requires going through a period of boredom, that's OK too. Boredom is a healthy transition between being constantly assaulted by external stimuli and getting to the point where you can direct your own internal life. We have never worried about exposure, and we have never flinched from boredom, although I think these are among the hardest things for parents to handle.

Another key aspect of the school is age mixing. The students are not confined to classes or activities that are prescribed by age groups. One of the most incredible features of the prevailing school system is how children are segregated by age. Even the so-called open classrooms only allow a few grades to mix occasionally. It is a fetish, based on a notion that all people develop in lock-step, in the same manner, month by month, year by year — a theory that runs entirely contrary to all experience with children young and old.

Age-mixing is our "secret weapon." It's nothing short of miraculous. The amount of learning and cross-fertilization that takes place defies measurement. You have to see adolescents explaining to six and seven-year olds what the rules of the school are. You have to watch children of all ages teaching each other how to use the photolab, how to use the computer, how to cook, to read, to skate, to play soccer, etc. Age-mixing is the first step towards true apprenticeship.

Another key feature of SVS is its staff, whose primary purpose is to serve the students' needs from a particularly close and vulnerable vantage point. We don't have tenure. And we don't have any inherent power in the school's administration. This is an absolutely central element of the mutual respect that develops between adults and students here. One of the first things that strikes you when walking into SVS is the warmth with which adults are greeted. It may take you aback — it's almost brashness. It's rarely ever rude. It's equality and openness. All this is an important step towards learning from another person, which can only take place in the absence of fear.

Another key aspect of the school is the judicial system which is designed to give people the feeling, and the reality, of justice for all. The fate of the school is in the hands of the community as a whole, not of a select group of enforcers. It's one of the essential kernels of the democratic process in the school, creating a sense of fairness that has to permeate the school in order for it to work. The minute that people think that things aren't fair, they're going to close themselves off. When they think they're in a fair environment, they can respond openly to each other.

The most important educational concept in the school is that of responsibility. For each student, as Harry Truman posted on his desk, "the buck stops here." There is nobody in the school who will carry the burden for your child and my child. They each carry it for themselves. It is impossible to overstate how important this is for the educational process here.

We saw this vividly when we first opened the school. In those days, students didn't believe us when we said to them that they were fully and solely responsible for their own education. We told them we would respond to expressed needs, but we weren't going to direct anyone. Several students thought we didn't really mean it. After all, we were good guys, progressive educators who, when the chips were down, were surely going to come through and bail them out. We had a group of students who tested us for months. They just wouldn't get going. They hung around. They listened to records. But they carefully didn't "do" anything. They were terribly bored, but they waited. They were testing us to find out the answer to a simple question: when would one of us finally break down and come into that room and put an arm around one of them and say, "We understand. We know you're going through hard times. Can we help you find something interesting things to do?" That's what they were waiting for, but it never happened.

One by one they had to break out of their stagnation on their own. That's the heart of the whole process. The ability to carry the ball for yourself.

At the beginning, I said that we don't know how children learn, at this school or anywhere else. All we know is that given an environment in which learning can take place, it happens joyously, happens excitedly, and happens rapidly.

I have taught elementary arithmetic at Sudbury Valley. The first time I taught it I had a group come to me, between the ages of nine and twelve, who didn't know any math at all. They were really hot to trot. So I thought about it a lot. In the early Sixties I had been involved in the development of the "new math," and I concluded that the new math is the worst thing that ever happened to teaching. Before teaching a kid that one plus one equals two, the new math has to explain the set theory background of what this means. What the kid wants to know is what one plus one is! So I got a textbook out of our library written in 1898 and went through it with them. We used to meet for twenty or twenty-five minutes at a stretch twice a week. In a grand total of twenty hours of instruction, they went from not knowing how to add to the end of sixth grade arithmetic, including fractions, and percentages, and decimals and the whole bit. Twenty hours. Because they wanted to learn. I mentioned this to an experienced educator whose field was elementary math. He was not in the least surprised. "We have always known," he said, "that the math that we teach an hour a day every day for six years can be learned in a few hours altogether. We all know that. But the children hate it, so that there's no way to do it except to shove it down their throat day in and day out and hope that over a six year period some of it will stick."

How they learn is a mystery. It happens in different ways for different people. The best we can do it give a surrounding that will encourage it to happen. *What* they learn at SVS is another story. We don't really care what they learn. We haven't pre-judged any particular area as being better to know than another area. Again, in the early years of the school, we were put to the test. We would say all fields are equal, but when we were faced with the reality, we were shaken. One student wanted to be a mortician. How many times do you get an adolescent in high school saying he wants to be a mortician? Can you imagine what a public school advisor would do with that? "I want to be a scientist" — yes. But "I want to be a mortician"?! Now he's become a very successful mortician. At the age of sixteen he was doing autopsies in an apprenticeship program.

Another student that same year told us his ambition was to be a railroad switchman. That's all he dreamed about. And he became a railroad switchman. The point is, when the atmosphere is free enough that a person can come up to us and say, "I want to be a railroad switchman," or "I want to be a mortician," we suddenly realize that it really is important for us to stick to our guns; that we're really not going to prejudge their interest, because we never can know what the human mind is going to encompass. What may look off the beaten track to us may be hailed as a work of genius five years from now by an admiring public who cry out, "Look at this daring person who went off and did something new and exciting!"

What do Students Choose?

Hanna Greenberg

In the days when Sudbury Valley was a dream about to be realized, I was often asked how we would deal with students who would choose to do only the things that they could do easily, and avoid learning subjects that they would find difficult. In those early days, when theory and not actual experience governed our thinking, I would reply that at SVS we would go along with the students' decision no matter what. We believed that if students were forced to study subjects that they hated or felt inadequate to tackle, then they would probably fail to learn them anyway. We preferred to teach things that were of interest to students rather than coerce them to study material they hated. I do not need to recapitulate here the experiences of educators which attest to the enormous effort it takes to teach an uninterested person material that should be easy to grasp, an effort that in most cases bears no fruit.

That was our situation in 1968. Today we need not theorize in a vacuum. We have experience, and our experience has shown us that our theories were valid although our initial expectations vastly underestimated the results we were to observe. We learned that not coercing students into learning had more far-reaching consequences than we had anticipated. We found over the years that many students not only devote time to learning what they love but choose to learn subjects that they find distasteful or boring. They not only do not choose the path of least resistance, but actually seek out the path that is most difficult for them. This phenomenon is widespread through all age groups, but manifests itself only after the students realize that their destiny is in their own hands and that their direction in life depends on their own actions.

This amazed us years ago when we first understood what was happening; by now, it has become common place. Students tell us often that they are studying algebra because they failed to learn it in their previous school. Or they need to do well in the SAT's to improve their chances of getting into the college of their choice, so they study material they find dreadfully boring for months on end. Others force themselves to play outside in order to overcome timidity, physical weakness, or social shyness. Others become active in the administration of the school in order to overcome their inability to organize themselves. The actual activities may vary but the underlying common denominator is conscious and purposeful choice to do what is conceived as most difficult.

Adults love to challenge themselves, and children do so even more. It is human nature to test one's mettle, to seek excitement in exploring the unknown and to enjoy solving problems. The children at SVS have time to do all that and more. They climb their personal Everests every day with courage and vitality. We often are awed by their actions and wonder how such young people possess so much wisdom and foresight to choose the difficult way in order to better their lives.

A New Look at Learning

Daniel Greenberg

At the Sudbury Valley School we have encountered a new version of the old story of the parent-child dialogue: "Where did you go?" "Out." "What did you do?" "Nothing." Our version is: "Where do you go?" "Sudbury Valley." What do you learn?" "Nothing." All too often that seems to be the refrain associated with the school by parents and by people in the community. When the school opened, there was a whole catalogue of objections to what we were doing; as the years have passed most of them have slowly faded away. In the beginning, we were told that the problem was that we were new, and people didn't want to try out a new school before they knew whether it would work or survive, or be accredited. Of course now we're not new anymore, and we have survived, and we have long been accredited. Earlier, there was always the question of how our students could get into college without courses, grades, or transcripts. We had to try to convince people on the basis of abstractions. Now there isn't any question anymore, because any graduate who has wanted to go to college has been admitted. In fact, many of our students have been getting in without our high school diploma. Then there was the question of how students would be able to transfer to other schools, in case their families moved, or they wanted to leave for other reasons. That too was an objection that people used as a reason for not enrolling their children — because perhaps at some later time they might have to go to a "regular" school, and then they wouldn't be able to get back to "reality." Now that argument has gone, because there are lots of former students who have gone from SVS to "regular" schools and have done excellently, without losing time at all. There were so many objections in the early years! People said the school would be chaotic; it would be undisciplined; it would be rowdy; it would be a fiscal nightmare because so many people have access to money; and on and on. We used to think that when people finally saw that the objections were groundless, slowly but surely they would come around to our way of looking at things, or at least accept us and think that ours was a pretty reasonable kind of educational system for their children and/or themselves. Alas, how wrong we were! Because there is one fundamental objection that will probably stay with us for the foreseeable future: namely, that this is a place where children don't learn anything. It is as simple as that. People say, "Whatever they do there — they may be happy, read, work, whatever — one thing is sure: they don't learn anything." This is something that the students enrolled at the school hear from their friends, and often from their parents. They hear it from grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins. We get it from all kinds of incredulous outsiders who walk into the school and say that it's very impressive, but then end with the view that students don't learn anything here. I think that this is probably the major factor that keeps new people from enrolling in droves.

What is really at the heart of the objection? It's not enough to answer by saying, "Yes, they *do* learn." We never really know how to handle it. The proposition seems so ridiculous, that we often end up saying, in effect, "What do you mean they don't learn anything? Look at A — he's learned this. Or look at B. She's learned this. Or look at this student sitting and reading." We respond with a flood of ad-hoc and ad-hominem counter-examples, with no real effect. But such answers don't really relate to the objectors. They look at A reading a book, and that doesn't satisfy them either. So he's reading a book! So what? That isn't learning. Nothing seems to satisfy them.

What, then, is the heart of this objection? Is it actually true that students don't learn anything at the school? If not, why do people think it is true? And what do students learn here? I'm going to address each of these questions in turn.

In order to get a handle on the whole problem, we have to analyze fairly closely the generally accepted view of learning. In this culture, the meaning of the word "learning" is closely determined by four fundamental assumptions. The first assumption is that one knows *what* ought to be learned by people. The second assumption is that one knows *when* it ought to be learned. The third assumption is that one knows *how* it ought to be learned. And the fourth assumption is that one knows *by whom* each thing ought to be learned. These four assumptions in essence determine the meaning of the concept "learning" for this culture. Let's look at them one by one.

The first assumption is that we know *what* ought to be learned. That is to say, the prevailing view is that there is a basic body of knowledge that every human being should know.

It is important to realize that this assumption is not an objective reality. Rather, it is completely determined by the time and the place and the nature of the culture that makes it. In other words, far from being a general truth about knowledge and about learning, it is an assumption that is completely dependent on the state of the culture that makes it. In different eras and in different places, various societies have made — and still make — catalogs of what has to be learned. For example, not too long ago, in American culture, there was the simple tenet that the "three R's" were the basics. During the twentieth century, education in this country has been "modernized," and to that list of three R's have been added successively other subjects that were considered equally important. Consider the 19th century in Great Britain: then it was felt that an educated person has to know Greek and Latin literature. In the Middle Ages the "basics" consisted of a course in natural philosophy, speculative philosophy, rhetoric, and so forth, and a very clear avoidance of practical subjects. I don't want to go into a comprehensive history of this subject. I only want to make the simple point that the assumption that we know what ought to be learned is determined completely by the cultural environment, and changes with time. Unfortunately, the one we're stuck with right now in this country was determined by an industrial technological view of our culture that is obsolete.

Indeed, two of the three R's are demonstrably obsolete. Nobody really needs to know arithmetic.

Everybody uses pocket calculators, or calculating machines, or computers, or adding machines. No accountant will sit and add long columns of figures by hand, or multiply by long multiplication, or divide by long division. Even the best will make more mistakes by hand than by machine. I can't think of anybody professional who uses arithmetic now. Even people who go out shopping take along their little pocket calculators on which they tote up their expenditures. As far as writing is concerned, that word has many meanings, but certainly two of the main meanings were penmanship and spelling, which were considered very important because people communicated either orally or through writing longhand letters. Today, anybody who's foolish enough to use handwriting is really at a disadvantage in any practical situation. Many schools and colleges don't even accept handwritten papers. Your average letter of application for a job, or your average business correspondence, would never be done longhand. In fact, it's considered an almost esoteric phenomenon if a person drops somebody a handwritten note. And it's equally unimportant to know how to spell. An awful lot of people I know, some of whom are very famous people, don't have the foggiest notion how to spell. One of the things any good secretary is expected to do is to correct all the boss's spelling, and even secretaries don't have to know how to spell: all they have to do is get paid for the time it takes to look up words in the dictionary, or use a word-processing spell-checker.

The point is simply that the concept of curriculum that prevails right through college was determined by the industrial society that this country had in the nineteenth century. There were certain fundamental skills, methods, procedures, and technologies that were needed in order to keep the industrial machine going. And I don't mean on the blue collar level alone, not only for the people who worked the assembly lines, but also for the secretaries, the accountants, the bookkeepers, and even the executives. The whole industrial machine operated according to some relatively simple robot-like functions that enormous numbers of people had to perform, and for which it was indeed necessary to have a basic, universal common curriculum for everybody. Of course, even then it was a question of whether or not a culture opted to have an industrial economy at all. The large agrarian economies didn't bother with these things. For example, Russia at the time of the revolution was just beginning to decide that it wanted to get into the industrial era, and the illiteracy rate was something like 95%. It just wasn't important for a mass rural culture to know the three R's. In fact, in the entire society there was only a small cadre of people who could write. Everyone else would go to these scribes to have all their letters and documents written or read for them. But for the population at large, it wasn't essential to know how to read or write or calculate or do any such thing in order to till the land or build the houses or do the kinds of activities that were central to an agrarian society.

Times change. In this country, we have come to the point where most routine tasks do not have to be performed by people, even though often they still are. We have the inherent capability to eliminate from the humanly-operated domain the entire body of automatic, robot-like operations that had to be done by enormous numbers of people. Indeed, the revolution that the modern communications industry has brought about in society is quite as profound as the revolution that mechanization achieved a century or two ago, when it simply did away with the need for vast numbers of physical laborers to do heavy work. (That revolution, too, was not universal; and there are some societies today where heavy mass labor is still used.) The new information-processing technology is now doing away with the need for droves of workers in industrial plants, or bookkeepers, or purchasers, or secretaries. Nowadays, once an industry is computerized, most of the operations are untouched by human hands. For example, when you place an order for a book with a major publisher, virtually everything is handled by computer. And when the inventory drops, and they need to order a new printing, the computer tells the presses to do it. You can imagine how many thousands of clerks have been replaced. I was in the publishing industry when this transition took place, and I worked for two companies, one of which was automated, and the other still had all its accounting done by bookkeepers standing behind tall desks just like you see in old movies — standing and writing longhand all the thousands of entries that had to be made day by day. Those bookkeepers don't work there anymore; even that old-fashioned company has entered the computer era.

The point is that robot-like individuals are not needed any longer in large numbers to man the industrial machine, and this fact has, at a stroke, rendered obsolete the entire pedagogical conception of a basic set of things that have to be known by everybody. Now we are faced with a completely different educational problem. I'm not talking about the Sudbury Valley School, or about our particular philosophy. What I'm saying applies to anybody planning an educational system for the modern era in this country. Nowadays, instead of preparing a list of subjects that are necessary for everybody to know, all you can do is draw up an enormous catalogue of different subjects and activities that are available in the culture, and then proceed from that point. If you believe in a planned society, you can try to apportion a certain number of people to each of these various fields for the good of society as a whole. That's a political decision, one which still doesn't mean, of course, that everybody is going to learn the same thing. It implies a complete lack of freedom of choice on the part of the students, but at least it's modern, and it doesn't make the basic mistake of thinking that everybody ought to be trained in the same way. The other major political philosophy that is prevalent in the world today is that of personal freedom. In that system, it seems to me that you have to end up saying that each person should be able to decide what that person wants to do. But the chief point I want to make is that regardless of political philosophy, the idea that there is a basic curriculum that everybody ought to know is gone.

Let us return now to the original question, and let me bring it down to specifics. Say we have a twelve-year old in the school and somebody asks, "Is that student learning anything?" What they mean is that they know that every twelve-year-old should be studying social studies, advanced arithmetic, and English grammar. This is the assumption that underlies the question. So if we answer, "This person is not learning social studies, but is learning photography, or music, or Greek history" — indeed, if we answer that the student is learning *anything else* but social studies, English grammar, and advanced arithmetic, the questioners will not be satisfied. As far as they are concerned, as long as the students in this school who are twelve years old aren't learning what the society today thinks every twelve-year-old ought to be learning, *they are not learning*. And it's only when people realize that it's a mistake, no matter what your philosophy of education is, to think in the late twentieth century that all twelve-year-olds ought to be learning a specific set of subjects — only when people realize that this just isn't a viable educational view anymore for modern American society, only then will they be able to say, "Well, I don't have to insist that they learn social studies, arithmetic, and English grammar when they are twelve. I can accept other subjects, other activities, as valid learning for a twelve-year-old."

The second underlying assumption is that one knows *when* a subject ought to be learned. This has a more modern origin that the first assumption. It's only been recently that people have become arrogant enough to think that they understand the human mind well enough to know in detail how and when it absorbs and handles knowledge. To be sure, people always knew that little children don't quite have the ability to handle things as well as adults, overall. But people saw that there was such a variety in how children develop that no one dared become dogmatic. A Mozart might play the piano at age three, and a John Stewart Mill might speak a dozen languages when he was four; one child would do one thing, another child did something else. It was only when psychology became "modern" that it got the idea that there is a specific, universal track that every mind follows in its development, and that all healthy minds proceed at pretty much the same rate along this track. One of the consequences of this view is that it's bad to be learning the "wrong thing" at the "wrong time." For example, if you are expecting somebody by age two to do a particular thing, and you find that the child is not, then you conclude that you have an incipient learning disability. I'm not exaggerating when I say age two. It is becoming much more common to extrapolate into earlier years, and engage in what is called "early detection" of alleged learning disabilities and psychological problems.

It is considered a property of the human mind that certain mathematical skills, certain scientific skills, and certain skills of reasoning are acquired at certain ages. As a result, it becomes important (according to this view) that schools provide exactly the "right material" at the right age. Also, it is considered bad to give third grade work to first grade students, because this doesn't develop their minds along the proper track. I think everybody is aware of these views.

One of the things that set me to thinking about this whole subject was a nightmare I had one night. I dreamt that just as we have schools now where all six-year-olds are put through drills in reading, and are drilled and drilled at it, whether or not they are interested in it — and if they don't achieve at the proper rate, they are immediately tagged and put into a special category and given special teachers — what I dreamt was that the same thing was happening to one and two-year-olds with regards to speaking. I suddenly saw a school for toddlers where they were all being taught how to speak, just the way we teach how to read, syllable by syllable, word by word. And if they weren't proceeding at the programmed pace they were going to be placed immediately into the "speaking disability category," and so forth. Perhaps this sounds ridiculous, but after all, we've totally accepted this attitude when it comes to reading. Why not speaking? And if you have a three-year-old who is speaking at a "two-year-old level," why not put that child in the Special Ed. class? It's a nightmare, and I think it's well on it's way to happening.

So again you ask yourself, where does this come from? How do these psychologists pull it off? Why was the society in general, and the professionals in psychology in particular, so eager to accept this kind of approach? Again, I think the answer goes back to my old theme. The so called science of psychology today is the natural child of the nineteenth century industrial technological scientific world view, which insisted on reducing everything in the world to a linear, tracked, simple series of progressions. This was essentially the definition of knowledge in any field. There was no such thing as real, solid knowledge that was not perfectly ordered, in an exact sequence of rational steps. If it wasn't ordered in that way it was non-scientific, it was "art," and as art it was allegedly the product of the emotions and of the feelings and not of the mind. Products of the intellect, by contrast, had to be "scientific." I don't think it's surprising people reached this view, because they were living in an era when everybody was drunk with the success of linear technology in the material world. After all, the view was appropriate to machines, to mass production, to the assembly line, to industrialization, to any enormous technological venture. It was true that those enterprises were ordered in a precise, linear fashion. So central was the industrial materialistic view of the world, that it engulfed all of knowledge, and the universal aspiration of the intellectual world was to be included under the umbrella of "science," in order to be legitimate. Indeed, if anybody came along and said, "My field doesn't want to be organized in a logical, rational way," they ran the risk of being told "If you can't show us the track of knowledge in your field, you're not really worthy of being a bona-fide subject." This approach was a perfectly natural product of the enthusiasm with technology that gripped Western society in the nineteenth century. People were consumed with a passion to extrapolate the technological world view to absolutely everything. And the fields of social theory and psychology were swept right along with all the others.

If you understand, then, that there is a deep yearning on the part of social scientists and psychologists to be "scientific" and along comes a person who purports to give, on the basis of what looks to be a very nice scientific work, a good linear theory of the mind, you can see why they will jump at it. And it comes then as no surprise that people like Piaget or Skinner rapidly become widely accepted by their colleagues, because they rescued the profession of psychology from the oblivion of being an "art" and turned it into a scientific discipline. I think that this idea is going to fall by the wayside eventually, but it's only going to happen when the whole culture begins retracting from the technological world view. You can see a trend in that direction in modern thinkers today. There are books being published by very eminent social scientists who are beginning to say, "This view of human knowledge really isn't valid. It doesn't take into account the subtleties. It doesn't take into account the complexities. It doesn't take into account innovation. It doesn't take into account change. It doesn't take into account the emergence of new theories, new ideas. It simply isn't adequate to explain what the human mind has done with the world." This is being said by more and more people who have a name in their fields. Whether their voice is going to prevail in the long run I don't know, because certainly in the short run the trend is toward a more feverish technologization of the social sciences. I think we are going to have a major struggle on this issue in this country, although for the time being the forces of technology are probably on top.

The third assumption generally made is that one knows *how* any subject ought to be learned, that there is a "proper" approach, a "correct way" to study a subject. Even if we have in our school a person who is learning what "ought" to be learned — for example, social studies — at the "right" time — namely, at age twelve — if the person isn't learning it in the "right" manner from the "right" textbook, it's not considered valid. The extent to which this has taken over education is astounding. It used to be widely accepted that there were a tremendous variety of approaches to any subject. One went to different schools, even travelled to different countries, to hear different people develop a specific subject in different ways. One went to a particular teacher because that teacher had a fascinating way of presenting a certain subject. This was an accepted feature of learning. Any subject was thought to be varied, complex and intricate, and every original mind was thought to have a different way of looking at it. It was once considered the height of absurdity to say that there is a "best" way to teach physics, or social studies, or anything. Alas, pedagogy, too, wanted to become a science, no less than psychology. Pedagogy too had to become an exact, technological field. The obvious result was that everything had to be done in the same way or it wasn't valid. All textbooks in a given field have to be the same. That's almost an axiom of publishing today. If you submit a textbook manuscript to a publisher that deviates from the accepted way, you'll get a rejection slip. It may be a great book, but if it is not the way the subject is taught in schools, they won't want to publish it. Of course, in a sense publishers are just representing the prevailing view. They are marketing agents, and they don't want to get stuck with a book that won't sell. What they are saying is that nobody out there in the educational world is going to use a book that is any different from the book that is used by everyone else.

I don't have to belabor this. It's an exact consequence of the kind of thinking that I was talking about earlier with regard to psychology. And in order to please somebody who is looking at Sudbury Valley in terms of the prevailing educational atmosphere, our shelves should be filled with the current editions of textbooks in all fields that are being studied in other schools. That would be a "good" library. Our library has a lot of books in it, and they are very varied, but it basically cannot be considered a "good" school library as far as educators are concerned because in any given subject they are going to look around here and not going to find only the "right" book in most fields. And the same applies to any student learning with the aid of any of these books.

I think, again, that in this regard a lot of people who stop to think about it realize that there is a basic flaw in the idea, regardless of their philosophy of education. The flaw is that it rules out completely any concept of innovation in a field. What's missing is any reference to how any one of the subjects being taught in school has ever changed or progressed. The textbooks always deal with static subjects presented "correctly." To me this is an internal inconsistency that should be obvious to anybody. I can only hope that eventually this contradiction will come to somebody's attention in teachers' colleges. Or perhaps this view will disintegrate on its own. As long as you assume that pedagogy is an art, or has variety, you are never under pressure to be right. You only have to have your own approach. You go to hear a teacher, and you either like that person's approach or you don't like it, but you don't ask whether that approach is "right." You say that it is self-consistent, or interesting, but it is not a question of being right or not. But in the present educational system people are constantly plagued with the problem of finding the "right" approach, and each time they find one they label it "right," and it becomes very embarrassing a year or two later to be faced with a situation where it turns out that it wasn't right after all. That leads to a lot of problems. There is always a "new" reading program. Every two or three years there is a whole new "right" way to teach reading, because the last "right" way didn't work. The educational world is constantly being embarrassed, only they don't ever seem to be ashamed of the fact that they were wrong. I guess there is always a hope that between the fact that they never seem to do the right thing, and the fact that actually there is no right thing, it may dawn on people eventually that the whole approach is invalid from beginning to end.

The fourth assumption is that one knows how to identify *by whom* any given subject ought to be learned. In a way this is the most insidious of all assumptions, but it follows directly from all the other points I have made. Our schools have a sophisticated and ever-improving system for tracking people, and for finding out at an ever earlier age what specific "aptitudes" a person has, so that a precise, narrow track can be determined for this person to follow throughout life. In this society, such a process is exceptionally subtle, because it involves an authoritarian approach within a free culture. By employing a variety of ruses the system produces a process which allows it to inhibit personal freedom without really feeling that this is what is going on. The person doesn't feel that something arbitrary is being done — which is in fact what is happening. Instead, the system creates the impression that it is simply looking out for each person's own best future, trying to find out what the person's needs are, and helping fulfill them. The fact that others are deciding what the person's needs and interests are, what the person is going to do with his or her life, is covered over by the illusion that really it is only *that* person's needs that are being considered. Now this is a combination of all the evils we have talked about. The assumption is that psychologically one knows enough about the mind to identify aptitudes; and a further assumption is that once one knows aptitudes, one also knows how to track a person to ensure the person will in fact reach the goal that is being set out. The whole approach is the ultimate in pedagogical and psychological technology. The only trouble is that it is humanly absurd. All you have to do is read biographies to discover how, time and again, attempts to identify a person's interests at an early age failed. To be sure, sometimes a person of three or four does give very definite indications of where he is heading, but most of the time quite the opposite is the case, and very often people show their true aptitudes only in their twenties and thirties and sometimes much later.

I think that we can understand why people in this society are going to feel, no matter what, that students at Sudbury Valley don't learn anything. They are bound to feel that way. There is just no way out. Because we are not fulfilling any of the four basic assumptions that define the new meaning of "learning" for our culture. And there is no way our philosophy allows us to act on any of these assumptions. So there is no point answering a person, "Look, A is reading a book, and B is learning this and that." Our approach just doesn't fit the whole society's frame of reference, and it's not going to fit until the outside world drops the assumptions that underlie its view of education.

Still, the question remains: Do people learn anything at Sudbury Valley? Obviously to us, the answer is "yes," from *our* perspective on the word "learning" — a perspective that may not be currently popular, but is nevertheless rooted in our culture's history.

The kinds of learning processes that I see occurring at the school all the time fall into four major categories. First, I think we have learning going on here in the development of personal character traits. Right off, that doesn't sound like "learning." But actually, character education has always historically been considered an important part of education, and even today gets a lot of lip service paid to it. Unfortunately, in the current educational system, it's talked about but nobody has any idea what to do about it. I think that we have developed a setting in which it can be shown that certain character traits are enhanced — traits like independence, self-reliance, confidence, open-mindedness, tolerance of differences, the ability to concentrate, the ability to focus, and resilience in the face of adversity. Every one of these traits tends to thrive in people who stay here for any length of time. Indeed, the society at large sees the opposite traits being enhanced in their educational institutions and they worry about it. They worry about the fact that their settings seem to encourage dependence, a "follower" mentality that relies on others' judgments rather than on one's own. They worry about the fact that such a high percentage of people are insecure, intolerant, unable to concentrate on their work, and not resilient to failure.

The second major type of learning that goes on here is in the domain of social etiquette. For example, children in this school are at ease with people of all ages and backgrounds and types (instead of the widespread trait that you see among children of the same age in public schools whose tendency is to turn aside, not to look an adult in the eyes, to be ill at ease, to shuffle, and to mumble). There is the characteristic of being considerate of other people's needs — a trait that I think is fostered mainly by our judicial system. There is a fundamental acceptance that other people have rights, that other people have needs, that other people have domains of their own that have to be respected. Then there is the trait of being articulate (people are often so inarticulate in the outside world!). And the traits of openness and trust — I am very reluctant to use those words, but not quite as much as I was in 1968, when they were catchwords for a social fad — as opposed to the suspicion and paranoia that seem to be rampant in the society, especially among teenagers. And also, there is a certain basic friendliness and courtesy that pervades relationships in the school.

A third category of learning that goes on is in the domain of academic subjects, where we not only see the acquisition of knowledge occurring, but we also find it taking place in ways that other schools would find unusual. For example, people do learn how to read in this school, sooner or later. It's intriguing to watch closely how this happens in each case, because it happens at different ages, and in completely different ways. I don't want to go into any details now, but just by way of example: some learn how to read by being read to over and over and practicing a book until they learn it by heart and start memorizing the words; others learn by piecing together syllables that they have picked up one by one; others learn by trying to associate letters with phonetic sounds. Each one does it in their own way, and at their own initiative.

Substantive learning goes on here in the fundamentals of arithmetic. It goes on in the principles of democratic government, and in current events. (This is actually rather interesting. The children in this school are generally up to date on what's going on in the world even though we don't have "social studies" classes.) There is substantive learning going on here in the domestic arts, including money management, taking care of yourself, survival, cooking, sewing, childrearing — a whole group of subjects which in other schools are relegated to a tertiary place, for poor learners or for girls, though the subjects are clearly central to living a good life. Here it goes on in ways that have nothing to do with age or sex or even with future career intentions. The list of different specific subjects learned by different people goes on and on — writing, management, painting, music, etc. — and it covers a broad spectrum of conventional and unconventional subjects.

Finally, there is a fourth category of learning that goes on here in a way that is not even remotely matched by any other environment, and that is the category of methodology. To be sure, there is a tremendous amount of writing done, for example, on the techniques of problem solving. But again, it's assumed in the usual technological way that there is a "method" for solving problems, and what one should do in school is teach this method. The only trouble is, the basic assumption is again false. If there was a method for solving problems, we wouldn't have any problems left. The whole point of a problem is that you don't know either its solution or the exact right method to solve it — if there is one. The idea that there are multiple approaches to problem solving, that there are lots of parallel paths that can be explored, that some are better than others, that they have to be compared, that there are all kinds of consequences that have to be followed out in order to make these comparisons — the really complex notions of what problem solving entails are an everyday feature of this school. Students have to deal with them every minute of the day in different areas. From small problems like how to get hold of a piece of equipment, or what do next, to major problems like what am I going to do with my life, or how do I study a certain field, or how do I answer the questions posed in the book I am reading, and so forth. Sudbury Valley does it better than anybody else. Students here also learn how to use resources, both human and archival. To be sure, in other schools somewhere around fifth or sixth grade they take the children to the library and describe the Dewey decimal system, and the librarian gives a talk on how to use the library. We all went through this, but most people never can figure out how to use the library anyway, and don't.

Anybody who has taught in college or graduate school knows that many graduate students have difficulty using the resources at their disposal. It's something that they have got to learn, and they have also got to figure out how to find the people who can help them. At Sudbury Valley we take all this for granted — the idea that when you want to learn something you have got to find someone who is an expert in it to help you, and you have got to figure out where you can find the resources in our library, or in an outside one. These ideas, and how to implement them, are commonplace around here.

Perhaps it is fitting to end with something that Tolstoy wrote about 100 years ago. He wrote:

> *"Don't be afraid! There will be Latin and rhetoric, and they will exist in another hundred years, simply because the medicine is bought, so we must drink it (as a patient said). I doubt whether the thoughts which I have expressed perhaps indistinctly, awkwardly, inconclusively, will become generally accepted in another hundred years; it is not likely that within a hundred years all those ready-made institutions-schools, gymnasia, and universities — will die, and that within that time there will grow freely formed institutions, having for their basis the freedom of the learning generation."*

Here was a great thinker writing in the 1860's that it would take another hundred years for these ideas to come to fruition. A century later, we were founded. It's uncanny. Will it take another hundred years to catch on?

On the Nature of Sports at S.V.S. and the Limitations of Language in Describing S.V.S. to the World

Michael Greenberg

Have you ever noticed the uniqueness of the way that sports are played at S.V.S.?

The experience is a beautiful one which brings out most of the noble characteristics which a person can possess. It also illustrates a point about language and the S.V.S. experience that is worth thinking about; for, although we give our activities at the school the same names as activities that take place elsewhere (for instance, "soccer games" or "history class"), what is actually happening during those activities at school is so fundamentally different from what happens elsewhere that the name becomes misleading. This is why it seems impossible, at times, to explain the school to people who haven't actually seen it.

To describe the school, we must explain what actually happens, mentally and physically, step by step, because people have no *direct* experience that is the same as ours. At best, their idealistic, utopian ideas may resemble our day to day experiences at school. People can be reached by showing them how their ideals of freedom and responsibility, of democracy and fair justice, translate into day to day actions. We know that people in other schools have no direct experience of these things. What we forget is that, even after school, most people don't have a direct experience of true democracy, fair justice, freedom, and responsibility in the full sense that we know them at S.V.S., just as people in other countries have no idea of what day to day life is like in the U.S.A. through reading the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Which brings me to how utterly incomplete and misleading terms like "soccer game" and "history class" are in describing those activities at S.V.S. I will take soccer as an example.

In other schools soccer is a game where all players on a team are of a similar age, sex, and, if the school is big enough, ability. It is played at designated times selected by the school. It is highly competitive both as regards an individual's performance on the team and the performance of team against team. There is a lot of peer pressure and one's status and sense of worth is highly dependent on physical performance. The fact that people manage to have some fun in spite of all these negative aspects says a lot about the deep human satisfaction that arises out of physical exertion and play.

This is what usually happens in other schools. The players arrive at the designated time wearing their uniforms. They are told by their coach how to improve their performances (not how to have more fun). They go to their designated positions. A team will always have more players than are allowed on the field so the people who don't perform as well as others will not be allowed to spend as much time playing. They play the game. "They 'work' the game" might be a more appropriate phrase, because traditional, organized amateur sport is almost as regimented as professional sports.

People who are paid $200,000 a year to beat other people in sports should be performance oriented. The average person who simply wants to enjoy the physical process of play, or who wants to improve their own ability to kick a ball simply as an athletic challenge, should be enjoyment oriented, not process oriented.

Here is what happens at an S.V.S. soccer game. One person says, "Let's play soccer" to some other people. Whoever feels like playing at that moment comes to the field. There are six year olds, ten year olds, eighteen year olds, maybe a staff member or parent who feels like joining in. There are boys and girls. Teams are then chosen with a conscious effort at creating evenly matched sides. Someone who hasn't been there would not believe the amount of effort that goes into making the teams even. Given the diversity of the players, this often consists of one team having an extra "big kid" who can play well and the other team getting a small army of six year olds to get in his way. People want even teams because they are playing for fun. It's no fun to play a game with lopsided teams.

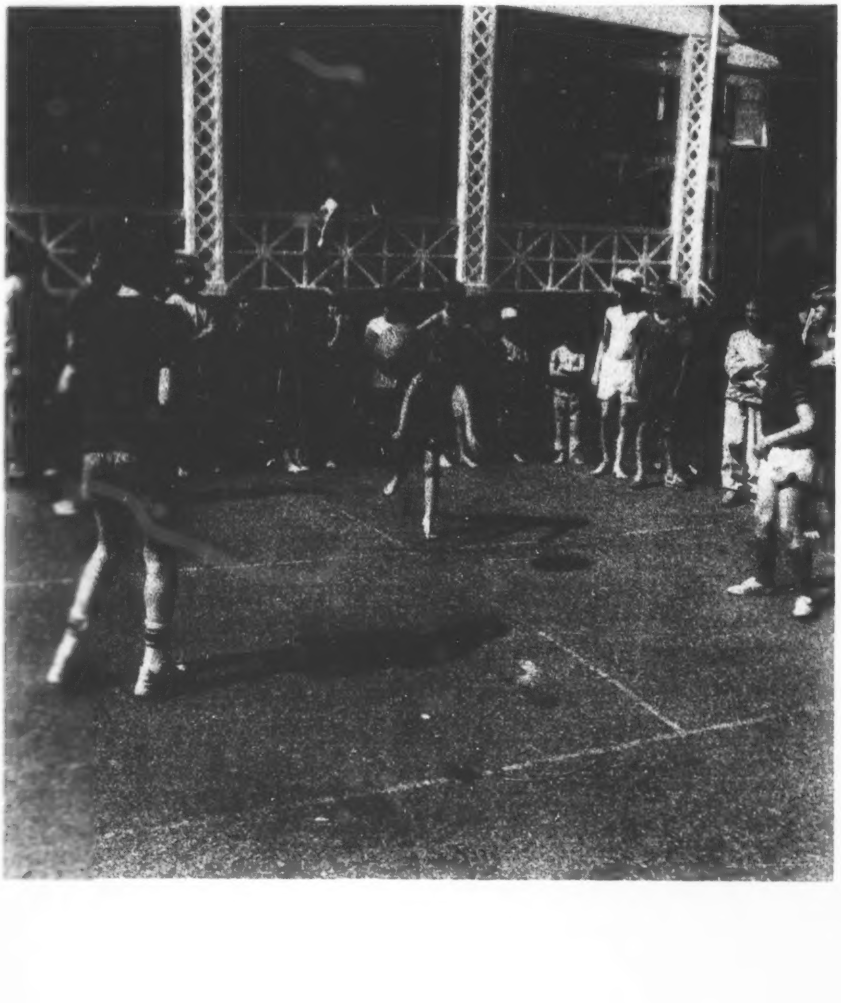
After a game starts, someone will often come and say, "Can I play too?" and the teams will be rearranged to accommodate them, trading players back and forth. If that proves impossible, they will be told "Get someone equal to you to play also." The game is played by whomever wants to play, for as long as they feel like playing. There will always be certain people who value winning, but there is little peer performance pressure. Most people don't really care who wins.

Now, you might get the impression that people are not trying very hard to be good at the game, but that's not true. Because the process of play is only fun if you exert effort and challenge yourself. That is why people developed the idea of games like soccer in the first place. Running around for no reason gets boring, but running around trying to kick a ball between two posts that are guarded by people who are trying to stop you — that's exciting.

The people who play sports as we do at S.V.S. learn far more profound lessons about life than those that can be taught by regimented, performance-oriented sports. They learn teamwork — not the "we against them" type of teamwork, but the teamwork of a diverse group of people of diverse talents organizing themselves to pursue a common activity — the teamwork of life. They learn excellence, not the "I'm a star" type of excellence, but the type of excellence that comes from setting a standard for yourself to live up to and then trying your best to live up to it.

I'm twenty-three years old and I've played a lot of soccer. It would be pretty silly for me to try to be better than the three eight-year-olds who crowd around my feet every time I try to kick the ball. I think that the eight year olds are too busy running after kids who are three feet taller than they are to worry about being the best eight year old. In this game, as in real life, the only standard that matters is one you set for yourself. One of the profound truths you learn is that we are all so different from each other that peer pressure and comparisons of worth are meaningless. If you're eleven years old and you are only allowed to play with other eleven year olds, it's very hard to glimpse this profound truth which unlocks the true meaning of excellence.

They learn responsibility and restraint. In all the years of playing very physical games like football, soccer, and basketball, there has never been an injury beyond a minor cut or bruise. People play all these sports in their regular clothes without any of the standard protective equipment that is normally required. How can this be explained when people wearing protective pads injure each other with alarming frequency? Because in a regimented, performance-oriented way of looking at sports (or life),



making sure you don't hurt someone becomes less important than winning. So it doesn't matter how much you talk about "sportsmanship" or how many safety pads you wear, people will get hurt. When you approach sports (or life) as a fun, exciting process, as something that is done for the sheer joy and beauty of *doing* it, then not hurting someone, not impairing their ability to enjoy the same process becomes a top priority.

This whole experience of sports at the school is just one of the many ways in which the kids answer the question, "What activities produce a meaningful life?" or, to put it more simply, "What is the meaning of life?" For people at school, freedom is not just a tremendous wonder, it is also a tremendous burden. This freedom to do what you want forces you to decide what you want. People play because they are free to, they want to, and they are alive. At the school, sport and physical play are magnificent expressions of the people who play them.

To participate in an activity where the clash of unequal bodies is transformed through teamwork, pursuit of personal excellence, responsibility and restraint into a common union of equal souls in pursuit of meaningful experience has been one of the most profound experiences of my life. I am sure it has had a similar effect on others. This can be easy for anyone to understand, but not if I simply tell them that I "played a lot of soccer at school."

When I was eight years old and people asked me what I did with my time at S.V.S., I said, "Nothing." I now realize what I meant to say was "everything." Education is not so much a matter of learning facts as it is a matter of learning how to think. What the school teaches (or, rather, allows people to learn) is how to think. It does this by allowing people to talk, listen, play and contemplate as they see fit. It is this rare and wonderful privilege that colors and gives meaning to every activity.

The language that we use to describe the school must take into account the uniqueness of the context within which things happen here. We must speak the language of philosophy. We must talk about the processes that occur when one of the deepest needs of the human spirit, the need for freedom, is fulfilled: the process that occurs when a young mind is forced by that freedom to find activities which it considers meaningful (because humans hate to be bored); the process that occurs when you do things because *you* want to, not because someone or something makes you. This is not a school to be compared blandly with other schools. It is a way of thinking and of living.

Reverence for all Life

Hanna Greenberg

What keeps me riveted to Sudbury Valley and its philosophy are my interactions with the children there. They challenge me and teach me and help me grow out of the bonds that the pedagogy of my own childhood put me in. Almost every day something beautiful happens to me at school but the following story is somewhat special because it took place in Portland Oregon, at the Cascade Valley School (CVS). It is a new school modeled after SVS and even though it is way on the other side of this vast country the two schools are linked in spirit. CVS invited me to spend a week there and to share with them what we at SVS have learned about running a free and democratic school.

As a treat for me the staff of CVS arranged a day trip to the Columbia River Gorge, where many little rivers cascade in numerous water falls into the Columbia. The area is blessed with lots of rain as well as with warmth and therefore the plants are plentiful and lush. Giant trees are covered with mosses, and the forest floor is green with many plants, flowers and ferns. As it was springtime in Oregon, many wild flowers were at the peak of their bloom. I don't know their names but they were purple, white and yellow of many hues. Notable among the flowers was the Trillium which is rare and protected. People are told not to pick it so as not to endanger its survival. As we were hiking by several enchanting waterfalls the children were frolicking in the pools around them, picking up rocks, climbing and jumping. They were enjoying themselves with their whole beings. It looked to me as if they were inspired by the beauty of the natural surroundings but I wondered to myself that I might be putting my own notions on them. Then something happened which not only proved to me that the children were conscious of where we were but also taught me a lesson about teaching and preaching.

One of the boys whom I shall call Saul is about eight years old and is always playing outside with great intensity. He loves to talk about his life in the outback of Australia where he was born. Listening to him is as informative as looking at a PBS nature show but is more personal, of course, and therefore absolutely fascinating. Its the kind of conversation that flows easily but which later you wished that you had taped so that you could recall it better. Well, little Saul was exhilarated the whole time we spent at the gorge. As we were walking he spotted a few Trillium in bloom and showed them to me. He was about to pick one when I, as a proper Nature-conserving adult, told him not to do it. He asked me why and I explained and he listened to me intently. However, later I saw that he didn't agree with me because he had made himself a small bouquet consisting of one Trillium, some ferns, and a purple lilac-like blossom. It was lovely. Saul cradled it in his hands for hours. I watched him playing with the flowers, rearranging them and examining them closely. It was as if he was making love to these flowers. And then I understood. Saul was learning to love and respect Nature precisely by having picked the flowers and getting to know them so intimately. Had he listened to my guidance he would have learned an abstract lesson in conservation but he would have missed an opportunity to fall in love with the beauty of Nature. Who can tell what is more beneficial to society in the long run — people who obey us as children and grow up with sterile knowledge or Saul who loves flowers so much that he will grow up to want to keep them around?

I was humbled by this little lesson. I learned how ingrained it is in us to preach and interfere in children's lives without acknowledging that even when we are teaching them an "important" lesson, as I was trying to do when I told Saul not to pick the wild flowers, the cost may be higher that the benefit. I don't think that adults should stop saying what they think, I just believe that the children should have a choice about listening and should make their own decisions.

When I came home from the Columbia River Gorge that day I was overjoyed with its beauty, but I treasured even more the lesson I learned from Saul's reverence for the flowers — to include children in my reverence for life, for they are the epitome of life in its full bloom of innocence.

Learning to Trust Oneself

Alan White

Life is a journey and upon reflection I realize that, in my journey, I have been trying to recapture what was mine as a young child.

The accomplishments of young children up to the age of five are remarkable and have been acknowledged by many before me. They learn to sit up, to crawl, to stand up, to walk, to gain command of spoken language (even several languages), among other things and since almost all babies accomplish these enormously difficult tasks, we are not as awed by their accomplishments as we should be. Rather than recognizing how successful they have been at teaching themselves tasks that would be very difficult for any adult, we have gotten the idea that when they are four or five we can now take over their education and really teach them all the "important" things that they will need to know to be a successful and productive adult. We want to share what we know, offering them short cuts to our hard earned knowledge, and save them from making mistakes. Even if I were to concede that our intentions were good, which is not at all a foregone conclusion, I would argue that we have never been able to come close to doing as well for our children as they have been able to do for themselves.

In 1967 a group came together to begin an experiment in education, the Sudbury Valley School, that recognized the remarkable achievements of early childhood and created a setting that would allow children to continue learning about the world without interfering. Having had the opportunity to watch the progress made by children in this unusual school, I have once again come to appreciate a lesson that I have had to learn over and over again.

Since life is extremely complex, even the most gifted of observers can notice only a facet of reality. Even then, some of the observations stand the test of time, some are modified, and some are replaced by observations made by gifted observers who follow them. This is true for all aspects of knowledge. It is in recognition of this awareness that I have come to reject all religions and schools of thought that codify original observations and will not allow them to change.

Perhaps the most important disservice adults make in attempting to help children learn is to try to substitute the adult's knowledge for the child's own feedback system which was so successful in the earliest years. It takes away self-reliance and replaces it with "expert" opinion. The child often becomes passive, confused and even angry. From earliest infancy, children develop their own criteria about what works and what does not. They constantly test new input against the feedback provided by their nervous system in order to correct and transform their criteria until they feel they have things right, at least for a time, at their particular stage of development. For example, their use of language in a family setting may need to be transformed when they try to communicate to others as their circle of contacts expands into the larger community, and the feedback they receive as the circle expands helps them transform the language.

Take something as basic as eating. Even the youngest of babies know when they are hungry and will drink their mother's milk until they have satisfied their hunger. In experiments conducted over forty years ago to find out what kind of diet young toddlers would choose for themselves, a smorgasbord of dishes were provided. This research concluded that, although children would often eat bizarre meals at any one occasion, over a month's time their food intake was well balanced. An adult population that is grossly overweight, that has to resort to bypass surgery to try to compensate for clogged arteries later in life; a population where heart attacks are one of the leading causes of early death, and where mobility is seriously curtailed by deteriorating muscles, is hardly in a position to substitute their knowledge of what is good for anyone to eat or how to care for oneself. Even for that minority of parents who are health conscious, it is a mistake to rob children of the ability to develop their own criteria for good eating and caring for themselves. Normal, healthy children are not self-destructive. They do not walk over cliffs or expose themselves to known danger. Now it is true that they may, in their inexperience, expose themselves to an unknown danger and we can not let them experiment by eating poison or walking out in front of an oncoming car, but it is the rule and not the exception that should be followed. We should allow children to develop their own criteria for what is right for them whenever possible.

Like many of my contemporaries I have been struggling with an overeating problem over the years, and I have become increasingly aware of the roots of my dilemma. I am tempted to eat when I am anxious or when I am restless. I feel compelled to finish whatever is served. I also feel "starved" when my customary time of eating approaches. I have had a sense for some time now that all of these feelings about food are only partly related to any real need for nourishment. I also know that people can fast for days, or even weeks, without losing energy or feeling starved. It is only recently that I have begun to focus in on the problem. I began by fasting for three days, paying particular attention to my feelings of hunger and how my body was responding. Once I had made up my mind that I was going to start a fast I did not feel particularly hungry at meal times, so I think that, like Pavlov's dogs, I have been conditioned to eat at certain hours of the day. Parents tell us that eating at scheduled times is for our own good, but it turns out it is for their convenience. The one who has to prepare food should be considered, but it should be stated that way and not passed off as something that is good for the child. When people we trust and depend on deceive us, it teaches us to discredit the messages we are receiving from our nervous system. Now that I am paying careful attention to when I am hungry, I am finding out that I am much more relaxed, eat more slowly, I am eating much less, and I am not eating just because I am anxious or nervous.

Up until the age of fourteen, I, along with many of my cousins, spent every summer with my grandparents who lived on a farm. There were horses, cows, pigs, chickens, cats and dogs, among other farm animals. The birth of new animals was always an exciting event in our young lives. These young animals became our favorites and we would clean and pet them. It was a very traumatic event when these pets were butchered and presented to us as part of our meals. My grandfather's response was that it was necessary to our own survival. Had I been given the choice I would never have killed my pets, but I trusted my grandfather's wisdom and learned to enjoy the taste of meat. Later in life I became aware that there were people who did not eat meat and who seemed to survive just fine, in good health. Moreover, there were many warnings coming from the medical profession about adverse side effects that came from eating meat. I am now a vegetarian by choice and have been for the past twenty years. I find that I am perfectly healthy, I have plenty of energy, I have lost the taste for meat, and I do not need to live with the idea that I am taking the lives of animals for my own use. Had I had the confidence in my own feelings I would have avoided part of a serious trauma when I was young and I may not have had to struggle with eating problems throughout my life.

Once you begin to question the experts you realize that there are no areas that you are willing to leave unchallenged. We all know from personal experience or from stories we have been told about the mistakes that doctors make. I have come to look at them as sources of information but to rely on my own intuition and insights as well. A number of years ago I had a severe rash on my leg that was very itchy. The more I scratched the more inflamed it became and the more it spread. I went to a dermatologist for help. He prescribed an ointment which he said would alleviate the problem but would not cure it. He told me I would have to be on medication for the rest of my life. That thought was a very difficult one for me and I was unwilling to accept it without looking for an alternative. Since I was aware that scratching only exacerbated the problem, I made up my mind that I would not scratch no matter how much my skin itched. After about a week of not scratching, the irritation and inflammation subsided and eventually disappeared. After several months went by, I scratched at my leg when I was nervous to see if the reaction would reoccur and it did, so that I was aware of the connection between my anxiety and the inflammation to skin of my leg. But I have never used the medication that the doctor prescribed and that was over ten years ago. This lesson taught me that a doctor is only a consultant and not an all knowing sage.

It has been a great effort to try to undo the education that was provided for my own good. Some of it has stood the test of time, yet there are many instances where the observations that were presented to me as truth have not stood the test of time. When it comes to my own body, I am trying to rely on the feedback that I am getting from my heart, lungs, and other organs. When it comes to information about the world, I am much more skeptical about expert opinion and always ask if these ideas really make sense based upon my own experience.

The Little Girl Who Taught Me a Big Lesson

Hanna Greenberg

A young mother of a charming five year old girl taught me a lesson recently. I complimented her on her daughter's intelligence. The woman smiled and said to me:

"People often tell me that, but for me it doesn't matter. I accept her as she is and love her. Her being smart has nothing to do with it."

I was a bit taken aback by the woman's reply to my well intentioned comment. However, upon reflection I realized that she was putting into words what I have believed in for years.

I too love my children unconditionally.

I certainly accept them as they are and delight in them no matter what they do (as long as they are decent human beings).

So why did my friend take offense at my compliment?

The answer came to me many days later, and I realized once again that even after being a parent for quite a few years, and after more than twenty years as a staff member at SVS, I still have a lot to learn about what the school really means.

All parents care for their children and feel responsible for them. But understanding to what extent parents should teach the children and when they should let them make their own decisions is where child-rearing becomes an art.

We start out sensibly with tiny children: babies are guarded and attended to all their waking hours, and no parent feels obliged to follow a developmental curriculum prepared by experts. We let the babies decide when to learn to crawl, talk, walk, feed themselves and so on. And it works like a charm. They do learn to master all these essential skills! As Dr. Spock told us more that three decades ago, by the time the baby gets married nobody will care when s/he started to eat hamburgers.

Then why do we begin to worry and fret and hassle our children until many lose their inborn faith in themselves? Our teaching and guiding causes them to become what we fear the most — dependent, insecure followers with low self-esteem. Then we wonder why such natively intelligent kids turn out to be so disappointing. Our children are too precious for us to dare raise them as our wise hearts urge us to, and instead we follow the dictates of our fears and anxieties. We act counter to what makes natural good sense, and propelled (sometimes even compelled) by our social mores we lose touch with our own children. By interfering with the children's innate drives to understand their environment, to satisfy their curiosity and to find their own path to truth, we stifle their life's force. What a pity! What a waste!

So when I told the young mother how intelligent her daughter is she reminded me that it was not her or my business to evaluate the child. The child is blessed by whatever she is and it is her own responsibility to develop herself in a way that will make her life good and meaningful.

Our job as parents and teachers is to respond to the children's needs, to provide them with the opportunities that the pursuit of their interests require and above all to love them unconditionally. All the rest the children will take care of on their own.

The Art of Doing Nothing

Hanna Greenberg

"Where do you work?"

"At Sudbury Valley School."

"What do you do?"

"Nothing."

Doing nothing at Sudbury Valley requires a great deal of energy and discipline, and many years of experience. I get better at it every year, and it amuses me to see how I and others struggle with the inner conflict that arises in us inevitably. The conflict is between wanting to do things for people, to impart your knowledge and to pass on your hard earned wisdom, and the realization that the children have to do their learning under their own steam and at their own pace. Their use of us is dictated by their wishes, not ours. We have to be there when asked, not when we decide we should be.

Teaching, inspiring, and giving advice are all natural activities that adults of all cultures and places seem to engage in around children. Without these activities, each generation would have to invent everything anew, from the wheel to the ten commandments, metal working to farming. Man passes knowledge to the young from generation to generation, at home, in the community, at the workplace — and supposedly at school. Unfortunately, the more today's schools endeavor to give individual students guidance, the more they harm the children. This statement requires explanation, since it seems to contradict what I have just said, namely, that adults always help children learn how to enter the world and become useful in it. What I have learned, very slowly and painfully over the years, is that children make vital decisions for themselves in ways that no adults could have anticipated or even imagined.

Consider the simple fact that at SVS, many students have decided to tackle algebra not because they need to know it, or even find it interesting, but because it is hard for them, it's boring, and they are bad at it. They need to overcome their fear, their feeling of inadequacy, their lack of discipline. Time and again, students who have made this decision achieve their stated goal and take a huge step in building their egos, their confidence, and their character. So why does this not happen when all children are required or encouraged to take algebra in high school? The answer is simple. To overcome a psychological hurdle one has to be ready to make a personal commitment. Such a state of mind is reached only after intense contemplation and self analysis, and cannot be prescribed by others, nor can it be created for a group. In every case it is an individual struggle, and when it succeeds it is an individual triumph. Teachers can only help when asked, and their contribution to the process is slight compared to the work that the student does.

The case of algebra is easy to grasp but not quite as revealing as two examples that came to light at recent thesis defenses. One person to whom I have been very close, and whom I could easily have deluded myself into thinking that I had "guided" truly shocked me when, contrary to my "wisdom," she found it more useful to use her time at school to concentrate on socializing and organizing dances than to hone the writing skills that she would need for her chosen career as a journalist. It would not have occurred to any of the adults involved with this particular student's education to advise or suggest the course of action that she wisely charted for herself, guided only by inner knowledge and instinct. She had problems which first she realized and then she proceeded to solve in creative and personal ways. By dealing with people directly rather than observing them from the sidelines, she learned more about them and consequently achieved greater depth and insights, which in turn led to improved writing. Would writing exercises in English class have achieved that better for her? I doubt it.

Or what about the person who loved to read, and lost that love after a while at SVS? For a long time she felt that she had lost her ambition, her intellect, and her love of learning because all she did was play outdoors. After many years she realized that she had buried herself in books as an escape from facing the outside world. Only after she was able to overcome her social problems, and only after she learned to enjoy the outdoors and physical activities, did she return to her beloved books. Now they are not an escape, but a window to knowledge and new experience. Would I or any other teacher have known how to guide her as wisely as she had guided herself? I don't think so.

As I was writing this another example from many years ago came to mind. It illustrates how the usual sort of positive encouragement and enrichment can be counterproductive and highly limiting. The student in question was obviously intelligent, diligent and studious. Early on, any test would have shown he had a marked talent in mathematics. What he actually did for most of his ten years at SVS was play sports, read literature, and later in his teens, play classical music on the piano. He studied algebra mostly on his own but seemed to have devoted only a little of his time to mathematics. Now, at the age of twenty-four, he is a graduate student in abstract mathematics and doing extremely well at one of the finest universities. I shudder to think what would have happened to him had we "helped" him during his years here to accumulate more knowledge of math, at the expense of the activities he chose to prefer. Would he have had the inner strength, as a little boy, to withstand our praise and flattery and stick to his guns and read books, fool around with sports, and play music? Or would he have opted for being an "excellent student" in math and science and grown up with his quest for knowledge in other fields unfulfilled? Or would he have tried to do it all? And at what cost?

As a counterpoint to the previous example I would like to cite another case which illustrates yet another aspect of our approach. A few years ago a teenage girl who had been a student at SVS since she was five told me quite angrily that she had wasted two years and learned nothing. I did not agree with her assessment of herself, but I did not feel like arguing with her, so I just said, "If you learned how bad it is to waste time, why then you could not have learned a better lesson so early in life, a lesson that will be of value for the rest of your days." That reply calmed her, and I believe it is a good illustration of the value of allowing young people to make mistakes and learn from them, rather than directing their lives in an effort to avoid mistakes.

Why not let each person make their own decisions about their use of their own time? This would increase the likelihood of people growing up fulfilling their own unique educational needs without being confused by us adults who could never know enough or be wise enough to advise them properly.

So I am teaching myself to do nothing, and the more I am able to do it, the better is my work. Please don't draw the conclusion that the staff is superfluous. You might say to yourself that the children almost run the school themselves, so why have so many staff, just to sit around and do nothing. The truth is that the school and the students need us. We are there to watch and nurture the school as an institution and the students as individuals.

The process of self direction, or blazing your own way, indeed of living your life rather than passing your time, is natural but not self evident to children growing up in our civilization. To reach that state of mind they need an environment that is like a family, on a larger scale than the nuclear family, but nonetheless supportive and safe. The staff, by being attentive and caring and at the same time not directive and coercive, gives the children the courage and the impetus to listen to their own inner selves. They know that we are competent as any adult to guide them, but our refusal to do so is a pedagogical tool actively used to teach them to listen only to themselves and not to others who, at best, know only half the facts about them.

Our abstaining from telling students what to do is not perceived by them as a lack of something, an emptiness. Rather it is the impetus for them to forge their own way not under our guidance but under our caring and supportive concern. For it takes work and courage to do what they do for and by themselves. It cannot be done in a vacuum of isolation, but thrives in a vital and complex community which the staff stabilizes and perpetuates.

Wrong Questions, Wrong Answers

Daniel Greenberg

Everyone has heard the aphorism, "To get the right answers, you have to ask the right questions." Much energy has been expended on trying to discover how to formulate "right questions" in any field of endeavor. But people seldom give much thought to the obverse dictum. At Sudbury Valley, it has more significance than the original.

No matter how much people read or hear about the school, no matter how many thesis defenses they attend, no matter how many graduates they encounter, they inevitably come around to the same old query: "What courses do you have?" In an era characterized by the quest for simple, unambiguous solutions, "courses" are thought to cure ignorance much as penicillin cures bacterial disease. They are the magic bullet, the universal panacea. In high school, a certain specified number of courses means a diploma. In college, the right mixture produces a degree. In the professions, course credits mean financial and career advancement. In business, they mark the road toward the executive suites. Do you want your car repaired properly? The TV ad tells you to go to the dealer whose servicemen have course certificates on the wall. Courses are the rites of passage, everywhere. It hardly makes a difference what the contents are, or whether they are retained for any length of time. (When I was teaching Physics at the university level, I remember sitting around with colleagues on the faculty who would laughingly admit that *they* couldn't come close to passing the courses that were being taught to their students.)

To ask students at Sudbury Valley what courses they are taking is to ask the *wrong question*. No conceivable reply can be proper. If the students being queried change the subject, they are being evasive. If they say "none," they are being outrageous (or hopelessly anti-intellectual). If they rattle off a list, they are saying nothing meaningful, and they know it.

What is, after all, a "course"? The very name is the answer to the question. It is a *designated path* for the flow of a selected collection of information. The instructor, the person who determines the course, picks the material, the method of presentation, the connections, and the rate of progress. The instructor's path is not the *only* path, nor is there any reason to believe that it is the best of the infinite number of paths available. The "best" cannot even be said to exist at all. More important, there is no possible way that any two people's paths for organizing a subject could possibly be the same. No two minds work the same way.

A course, then, is a glimpse into the *instructor's* way of organizing, and thinking about, a subject. As such, it is a curio. For the most part, for the overwhelming majority of instances, it is of no more lasting value to the listeners than a glimpse of a passing scene. At best, in some rare and lucky instances, it serves as a spark to provide insight, to trigger another person's own private train of thought. When courses are given to willing participants, it is a form of entertainment — like a movie, a play, a reading, a concert, a show. When courses are given to unwilling participants, it leaves behind scars of hostility, anger, and apathy.

Sudbury Valley School was established not as yet another institution to enshrine courses, but as its antithesis, a place where the internal growth and personal path of each student is sacrosanct. The processes that have value at Sudbury Valley are the private ones that take place within the minds and souls of each student. To find out the real value of Sudbury Valley, one has to ask personal questions; and to do that, one has to first take the trouble to forge a relationship that enables such questions to be answered. Parents who have close personal bonds with their children, peers who are friends, teachers who have shown real caring, these people can ask, at our school, "What is going on with you these days?" They will be graced with *real* answers — not with course lists, or with silence, or with anger, but with the flow of internal revelation that constitutes truth.

Ask the wrong questions — get the wrong answers.

Do People Learn From Courses?

Daniel Greenberg

There is continuing pressure on the part of the outside educational community to make people at the school feel that there is something defective in a person's education if she or he hasn't had certain formal courses in certain subjects. This pressure plays on the insecurity of many students who wonder, "Can I really go into a certain field if I haven't had courses in it, if I haven't had formal schooling in it and learned it 'properly'?" An uneasy feeling is generated that a person just can't do something right without an "adequate" course background in it. In fact, it is virtually universal that if you go to somebody and say, "I want to become an X, or Y, or Z," the first kind of advice you get is to take courses and get a formal degree in the subject, because that way you will get the knowledge you need to do the work, whether it is laboratory work or history or English literature or anything else. So I want to address myself to this question, because a lot of times we are asked, "Do you have courses?". It is not so much that I want to discuss whether or not we have courses, but I would like to focus on the more basic question of how one learns something, and in particular what relationship does taking a course have to how one learns things.

As I see it, there are three levels of learning that take place in every person. The first I would like to call "curious probing." It consists of superficial attacks on the environment, or on any particular subject. It is something random, something accidental; it has to do with a person reaching out to grapple with things that happen or that comes up in the environment. It is rapid, it is triggered by something that happens; it is not the result of contemplation. You come across something and you want to know more about it, so you ask a question, or you are curious about it and you go to the library and get a book about it and think about it for a while. Most of this curious probing never leads anywhere serious. It is filed away, it just becomes part of the great reservoir of the subconscious that you may call upon later to make some interesting associations when you do some really important work. It has no direct follow-up.

I think it is important to understand that the very nature of curious probing is superficial. That's a desirable characteristic in this case. The fact that you don't follow up isn't a defect in this kind of learning; on the contrary, it is the essence of this kind of learning, because it is meant to be scatter-shot, it is meant to introduce you to as many different things and stimuli as possible. Our formal educational system has emasculated curious probing terribly, because it has made a virtue of "follow-up", and thus has robbed the probing of its most essential aspects, namely, spontaneity and rapidity. If you want a vivid picture of what I am talking about, look at any "progressive" school. These schools pride themselves in being very sensitive to the interests of children; they boast that they pick up all the leads provided by the children and try to follow them out. A really good progressive school teacher is one who watches a child closely, who observes that first glimmer of interest in, say, a rock, and who then promptly comes forward and tells the child, "Oh, you are interested in rocks; we have a wonderful collection of books on geology, etc." This approach is a turn-off to curiosity. What the child learns in an environment like that is that it doesn't pay to probe, and if you do, you have got to hide it like a criminal activity, because if anybody ever catches you, they will follow up on you and they will get you involved to a degree that you just don't want to be and don't feel you ought to be.

Personally, I think that schools respond this way to initial curiosity as part of a calculated campaign by the educational establishment to kill curiosity. You see, there are two ways to kill curiosity — an efficient way and an inefficient way. The inefficient way used to be just to forbid people to do things. This was inefficient because, while the teacher was standing up lecturing and trying to keep discipline, somebody had another book hidden under a school book or the desk, and was curiously probing away. So modern man found a better way to kill curiosity: simply to nurture it to death by the follow-up approach, to grab it, to "love" it, to convert it to something that it isn't and to make a person feel guilty for not following up the first tentative probes. I think that the modern day student who is in a "progressive" environment has curiosity knocked out quickly. The person learns that whenever s/he looks at any kind of interesting thing s/he is going to be pounced on. As a result, probing curiosity loses its whole function as a learning mechanism.

Now we turn to a second level of learning. When I call it "second" I don't mean to imply that it is in any sense "between" the first and third. It is a *different* kind of learning, and happens to be number two on my list. This kind of learning I call "entertainment-style." The primary aim of the entertainment is having a good time. That's a perfectly legitimate primary aim: we all like to go out and have a good time. The second kind of learning is one that comes as a by-product of having a good time. Everybody knows that if you go to Coney Island you learn a lot; there are all sorts of things going on, it is a fantastic experience. Or consider a movie: you see a movie, and you may learn a moral message, or you may learn some little trivia about camera technique or something else. We know that all kinds of learning can be picked up as a by-product while you are having a good time. This is painless learning, and it is in a category of its own because it is not to be confused with learning as a primary goal. I'm all for people having a good time, but if the primary emphasis is on the entertainment and only the second by-product is learning, then clearly, almost by definition, this is not an efficient mechanism for conquering an area of knowledge. You can get lots of secondary fallout, but learning is not the primary goal. On the other hand, it is a pleasant thing to be entertained. People like to be entertained, people seek it. And it has been a fact throughout history that people involved in the entertainment profession have always sought to teach something on the side. For example, political movements always seized on the entertainment media as a way to introduce their program, via ideological literature, ideological theater and poetry and music and so forth. The idea is to seize people's desire at all ages to have a certain amount of fun, and to utilize that for other purposes as well.

The third category of learning that I'd like to distinguish is learning for the sake of mastering something, for the sake of getting hold of a field or an area or a subject. This kind of learning is the opposite of curious probing. For some reason, a person feels focussed; the scanning camera has stopped, and it has focussed on a certain scene, and s/he really wants to get a clear picture of it. There are many characteristics of this third kind of learning that are worth noting. Characteristic number one is that it is *unstoppable*. It is something that wells up within a person and becomes a preoccupation. Indeed, that is what it means to "zero in" on something. That becomes the only thing you want to do, it is what you are obsessed with, what you are totally devoted to and involved with. It is an incredibly difficult thing to place effective roadblocks in the path of a person who has really focussed on something and wants to do it. You can't discourage them with any of the ordinary arguments, such as "It's too hard for you, it's too expensive, it will take you too long, it's too this or too that." None of these things will work because the person shows an exceptional degree of obstinacy and sheer orneriness in pursing what they want. This is something that happens all the time in the Sudbury Valley School. When we first started the school, we used to have long discussions on how we could tell when a student is really interested in something. We finally realized that it is really no problem at all. If a person is really interested in something, they can't be stopped. So if you really want to find out, try and stop them. Of course, usually you don't have any need to find out, so you just let them go for a while and their interest becomes evident anyway. You can see it in a whole range of activities that have happened at school. Any biography of a person whose achievements we respect will usually stress this point, that the person got an idea, clung to it, and nothing could stop him. Biography after biography is just such a story of how people overcame obstacle after obstacle to achieve their goals. The hallmark of learning for the sake of mastering is the enormously potent drive that yields to nothing at all. Even normal, everyday life drives play second fiddle. You don't eat well for days on end, you don't sleep enough, you don't think of entertainment, you don't think of sex, you just think about the thing you want to do and you are totally taken up with finishing it.

Now from these observations there follows a second important characteristic: there is no turning this drive to learn on and off. Time plays a very important role, in the sense that you can't be relaxed about it. You can't be told, "Well, it is very nice that you are interested in this, but if you come in every morning at nine o'clock I'll give you fifteen minutes, or an hour." This is just out of the question. The person wants to know *now*. They are ready to sit down and talk twenty hours in a row, and maybe that would satisfy them, but stringing it out for months and months is out of the question. They want to go to the library *now*, to read every book on the shelf.

A third point about learning for mastery is that it brings with it its own evaluation. It is an inherently self-evaluative kind of learning, in the following sense. When you set a goal to conquer a certain area you will stop only when you have convinced yourself that you have achieved your goal. No one else can convince you that you have achieved it if you haven't, and if you think you have, no one else can convince you that you haven't. How many times have you seen someone come over to a child and say, "It's all right, you don't have to go any further, go to sleep now," or "It's time to turn to something else, it's no good for you to do nothing but this, you've done enough in this direction, you're good enough at it." And the person will insist on going further until convinced inside that the quest is finished.

When I talk about self-evaluation I mean that people set their own goals, and determine for themselves whether they are really satisfied. In the course of their activity, they will almost always turn to other people for verification and for instruction. They will ask how you do this, how you master this or that skill, does this look right, does that? They will ask for a lot of input, opinions and data from other people. But the ultimate decisions as to whether or not they are satisfied is theirs and theirs alone. Again, we know this to be true in situations that have made history. Think of all the people who have come up with new theories. We know very well that the reactions are always negative whenever a person comes up with anything new. The standard reaction of the whole world is that this is not good, it's wrong, it's new, it is different from what we have always done and from what is right. Innovators use these reactions to sharpen their arguments, but they are never a substitute for their own personal determination that what they are doing *feels right.*

Having distinguished three types of learning, we can now return to the question posed in the title: Do people learn from courses? Reviewing the three basic categories of learning outlined above, we can answer the question rather quickly. Courses cannot play a significant role in a person's quest to master a field.

The very word "course" tells you what the essence of a course is. A course is something spread out in orderly fashion, block by block over a period of time; it runs along a set path. A course inherently contradicts the immediacy of a drive toward mastery. And it just won't do because by nature it derives from external opinion, external evaluation and external authority.

Now, everyone accepts this viewpoint for people over the age of twenty-five; this is just another example of how our culture treats different ages in different ways. Consider the following proposition. If a mature adult — say, an academician — comes along and says, "I want to switch fields. I have decided that I'm not going to continue working in physics, I'm going into history," will their colleagues think they are going to enroll in History I and then take a year of History II then a year of History III, maybe get a B.A. in History, and then maybe a year later an M.A.? Of course they are not thinking that. They are thinking, "Old professor so and so is going into history — that means they are going to learn the field of History." How it is done in detail will not concern them, but one thing nobody will assume is that courses will be involved, because it is absurd. You don't think a mature professor is going to get anything out of a course. The professor is obviously going to attack the material directly.

The role of courses in curious probing has already been discussed, and there is really nothing to add. Courses simply have no relationship to curious probing. We are thus left with the role of courses in entertainment learning, where I think they have an important function. Courses are the learning analogs of the soap opera, or magazine serial, or anything like that. They are a stretched out form of entertainment.

After all, in our schools we've got to keep the students entertained for eight to ten months, so naturally the solution is similar to the one the television networks adopt. They have to keep the viewers entertained, all day long, month in and month out, and they would get nowhere if they gave a complete show every day; instead, they string out the story over weeks and months. In the same way, schools devise a stretched out entertainment mechanism to keep their clients happy. The entire science of pedagogy from A to Z, on the elementary and secondary and college level, is the science of entertaining students with a hoped-for educational by-product. A course is a way to ensure that your entertainment will continue over a period of time.

I wish to stress that I do not look down on entertainment as a value in itself. But it is absurd for people to confuse the entertainment with learning for mastery. That's where the problems begin. For example, I don't think there has ever been anybody in the Sudbury Valley School who opposed courses, recognizing them for what they are, any more than anyone opposed showing movies or anything like that. But we have never made the mistake of confusing these two functions.

I want to add a word on a related point. There is one kind of lecture course that stands in marked contrast to all the other kinds. Also, it's relatively rare. I am referring to a course that serves a primary function for the lecturer rather than for the hearers. There are times when people come up with new ideas, and as part of developing a way to communicate with the rest of the world, they may give a series of lectures or a course, or engage in some other such interaction with other parties. In that case, the course serves as the first communication of an original work to the world. This serves a crucial role for the creator. It helps clarify ideas, it provides feedback, etc. The only question is, what good is it to the listener? And that's really a puzzling question. If the listener happens to be zeroed in on the subject matter, which is very rare — then an almost miraculous thing takes place; here is the lucky listener, interested in a given subject, and all of a sudden there just happens to be in the vicinity a person who has just created some new thinking on the subject. It is an exhilarating experience, but unfortunately very rare. On the other hand, for most of the hearers such lectures are just a very exceptional form of entertainment — exceptional because in addition to the usual entertainment value there is the thrill of being among the first to hear the ideas being expressed. I remember many such occasions in physics in the fifty's and early sixty's. A person would come up with a new theory, and when the first lectures were given, the hall would be electric. The hearers would respond to the burst of creativity, though they couldn't care less about the subject matter *per se*.

A school like ours has a place for that kind of lecture course not because it is directly important to the students for the subject matter — that is a rare accident — but because it is important to maintaining a vibrant intellectual atmosphere in the school. It should be widely known that we always welcome people who are willing to share with us the first fruits of their creative thoughts.

A Moment of Insight

Hanna Greenberg

One of the most embarrassing questions I am asked by people who listen to my spiel about how children learn most of what they need to know on their own is this: "Let's assume that what you say is true; then why should they go to SVS at all? What do you as staff do there for them?"

What am I supposed to say? That I am there to answer the phone, drive to zoos, to museums, to hardware stores, to fishing holes and such, and sometimes to teach them some math or answer questions about spelling, zoology, or whatever?

The truth is that as staff we do many things, and one likes to feel that after all these years we need not worry that students and parents don't realize what they are. However, since some students who spend years at SVS and never attend regular classes seem to get as much out of their school years as those who do have classes, I have often wondered to myself about the actual teaching that the staff does. How and when and why do some children use us as teachers, while others don't seem to need or want us in that role?

During a recent vacation I got a little insight to this question. This is how.

Joan Rubin and I have been cross country skiing for about fifteen years. We had both heard from friends what fun it is, so we bought the skis, poles and boots and when the snow fell, out we trudged. We had great fun but we were awful skiers. We never seemed to learn how to go up or down hill. The snow had to be just perfect for us. Not too fluffy or too icy. We kept going out five to ten times a year but we never made real progress. Then during the vacation we went out one lovely day and proceeded to fall and slip and slide on the rather icy snow. On the spur of the moment, we decided to take a lesson from an experienced teacher. After a mere two hours we learned so much that hills that had terrified us became our favorites, and places that we had tried to avoid at all costs became our playgrounds. Needless to say we were both elated.

As I was mulling over this experience, it occurred to me that here were some answers to the questions I raised about teaching and learning at SVS. True, many people can figure out how to ski (or do algebra or read) all by themselves — but I didn't. True also that many people learn well from teachers, as I did with skiing. It seems to me that people truly interested in a certain subject or activity will work at it until they master it, whether or not they are aided by others. However, there are some things that people like or need to know without a major commitment of effort. In such cases, they can benefit from an expert because they are unwilling to put in the time required to figure out the problem on their own. So it seems that those students who are crazy about algebra will sit with a book and study it on their own. Others who want to learn it as a challenge, or to pass the SAT's, are apt to ask us to teach them. Both categories of students should have the choice of how to pursue their learning, alone or with a teacher. Often students will study some subjects on their own and seek a teacher for other subjects. I am glad that they can do both at SVS, and thus in each instance find the best way to satisfy their own learning needs.

VALLEY SCHO

When does a Person Make Good Use of His Time?

Daniel Greenberg

I have become more convinced with each passing year that even though a host of problems are raised in connection with the Sudbury Valley School educationally, the root problem people have with the school is whether the people here are going to make good use of their time. That is what really bugs people, whether they are parents, or visitors, or educational critics, or even potential enrollees. "Suppose I send my kid and she spends a year or so at the school. What's she going to do with herself? Is she going to waste her time there?" As a result, we find it necessary to get into philosophical discussions on what's a waste and what's a good use of time.

Even though a lot of other doubts are voiced with respect to the school that have to do more specifically with learning theory, I don't think learning is the primary problem. By now people look around and see that students who have been here for several years are full of life and bright-eyed; that eventually they all teach themselves how to read one way or another; that all those who want to are able to get into college; that they learn enough math to use if they need it; and so forth. But even when people concede that the learning will be all right and the career advancement will not be hindered, still there is something that really bugs them, and that's the use of time: are students going to make good use of their time while they are going to school?

There are all kinds of peculiar fears lurking behind that worry. Many a parent feels that even if a child learns everything the parents want, and does everything the parents want, somehow if that child hasn't "used his or her time well," it's been a waste of money.

Often, we say in reply that one has got to respect and trust people and that however they use their time is their own business. That answer is right, but it only goes part of the way. It doesn't really address the worry. It's sort of a moral or political answer: "What I do with my time is my business, and it is an invasion of my privacy for you to ask about it." That doesn't answer the real concern of the parent who may even be ready to concede the political question but still is worried: "O.K., so I have faith in my kid, and I'm not going to intervene in his life, but is he going to do well?" So I think the time has come to grapple with the question directly.

The answer isn't simple. In fact, there are so many versions of answers that you know you are in trouble before you even start. You have people who say you should never worry about time, time is just a terrible imposition; you shouldn't be uptight about it, you should give a person all the time in the world. These people have a perfectly relaxed attitude towards time. The trouble is that these people run into one major roadblock: if you have ever gone to a country where the entire population has that attitude toward time, you go crazy. It is all very nice to say, "Let people use their time any way they wish," until you visit the Caribbean, for example, where the entire cultural milieu has that framework. Everybody feels that there is no rush about anything. And most Americans go crazy after a while. It's nice for a vacation, but nothing that you really want to get done gets done. If you want to build yourself the simplest house, or get yourself outfitted, or make use of something, you find the supplier is asleep or the ship hasn't come in, or someone essential went off to another island, and soon you get to realize that precious little ever gets accomplished. What you expect to take a month or two could take a year or two or never happens at all. Time begins to loom very large in your mind after exposure to this kind of general atmosphere. So the simple, relaxed answer which so many people want to give is really not satisfactory at all.

On the other hand, the neurotic answer that we are exposed to in this culture is just as clearly not the answer. "You've always got to be doing something useful. You have to account for every minute of the day in a productive way. If, when you go to sleep at night, you can't really say that you have used every minute of your time productively, then a piece of your life has flitted by, never to return again. You've just squandered it." That approach may be effective in producing all kinds of results, but the trouble with it is that it calls forth a host of counter examples of all the great things that we admire in our culture being the result of a relaxed attitude. The frenzied approach never created anything worthwhile. Great physicists, for example, spend oodles of time climbing mountains or sailing on yachts to get their ideas, etc.

In seeking some kind of a comprehensive picture that makes sense, I've come to the conclusion that the basic need is to understand the unique amalgamation that makes up Western Culture. It is only against that background that any use of time makes sense. What is unique about Western Culture is its subtle and artful combination of technology and creativity. By technology I mean all the aspects of the culture that are methodical, routinized, go according to fixed rules. These are the backbone of such activities as engineering. The technological aspect of the culture is the part that is rigorously determined within a strict logical framework.

Every culture has a technological side to it. That is an inherent part of controlling the environment: you discover certain fixed relationships which enable you to control your environment. No matter where you live, whether in the most undeveloped part of the world or in the most advanced, in order to give your life some order you always manage to come up with some fixed relationships that serve as guideposts. In our culture, this trend came to be very highly developed in ancient Greece. There is an historical record of every step of the development. The Greeks seized on this aspect of the culture, elevated it, and made a great art of it. In particular, they developed the science of logic to an extremely advanced state. Later, the Romans did the same with engineering.

The key point about technology is the logically rigorous aspect of it. You build a bridge on the basis of relationships that you know are going to be valid. If it collapses, you don't throw up your hands and say, "Oh, well, it's some act of God." Instead, you make an investigation to see if someone has altered the cement, because you know that there is cause and effect operating in bridge-building, and that if it had been done right the bridge would have stood. The technological aspect of society is hard and fast, linear and unique; you are dealing with a routine, a prescription, a known way of doing things. This is the basis for all of our industrial technology. The technological side of the culture can — with a considerable effort, to be sure — be reduced to sets of routine operations that are very carefully defined; to the extent that this can be done, we can eventually reduce the entire technology to a completely automated, mechanized procedure.

During the last two hundred years people got ever more enmeshed in the technology, especially in mass production industry. The recent development of computers means that gradually people are going to be moved out of the technological side as machines take it over. Now my point here, in talking about time, is that the greatness of Western Culture is heavily dependent on technology. Even those who talk about a "return to nature" depend heavily on the technology to keep their dreams going.

Let's look at the other strand in the culture briefly. Creativity is an inherent human trait and is obviously going to be found in every culture. But again, I think in Western Culture it has been given tremendous outlets it doesn't have in other cultures. Consider how we use the media. In the old days, or in other forms of society, if a woman wrote great poetry maybe only her neighbors would hear it, or maybe somebody would reduce it to writing and it would be circulated among a small number of readers. In our culture, it is not just that we have printing, it is that we have an *attitude* toward it, we *want* to distribute literary creations, we want them widely known. There is a positive attitude towards the distribution of the fruits of creativity in this culture. It is not enough to say that the printing press made it possible for people to read great poetry, or the phonograph made everybody have access to great music. To be sure, the printing press made it possible, but it was a positive attitude in the culture that made it happen, because a printing press could print nothing but nonsense and phonographs could play nothing but junk. The culture itself has placed a high premium on its creative people. It has done everything to make heroes out of them and distribute the products of their creativity. Somehow Western Culture has had the inner security to encourage diversity and innovations more than any other culture. After an initial burst of creativity, most other cultures settle into a form that is fairly stultified after a few centuries. It is a unique feature with us that we continue to place a premium on creativity, we continue to welcome innovation generation after generation, after thousands of years: we thrive on change.

That's enough background to deal with the problem of time. A "good use" of time is relative to what you're using it for. It depends on which of the two strands of our culture you are focussing on to answer the question. A person who is involved in some way in the technological aspect of the culture is making good use of time when s/he tailors time carefully and rigorously to the technological needs which are being called for. This is the basis for our whole attitude towards efficiency, towards deadlines, towards getting things done. If you are going to get into the technological side, you've got to make a technological use of time. That's where we part company with the Caribbean Islanders. Because even when they deal with technology they take it easy. Even when they build a road, they do not watch the clock. Now, if you are going to build a road, if you are going to have to lay down a mile a week, everybody is going to have to do a certain amount of work in a certain amount of time; it is a technological demand that is being made. One isn't saying, "Let's sit down and create new ideas about transportation." One is saying, "Let's build a piece of asphalt road one mile long"; and there are specified ways of doing it. It's not an unknown, it's not a contest for creativity. It's something known, rigorous and logical; there are clear specifications that you can meet. You are making good use of your time when you meet the technological specifications.

On the other hand, if your requirements are in the creative, non-routine realm, then you are making good use of your time when you do not impose any technological limitations on your use of the time. All the requirements are for freedom. You are by definition in an area that is exploring the unknown. And if you don't know the answers to the questions you are dealing with, you obviously also don't know the answer to how long it is going to take to deal with them or how you can best use your time to get to the solution. So when people make technological demands on time in a creative milieu, it is terrible. In our educational system we do it to an absurd degree. We even have "creativity tests." They have become a standard part of the educational testing repertoire.

With a dual concept of time, I think we can start coming to grips with the anxieties of parents and enrollees regarding the use of time in the school. The point is this: to the extent that somebody in the school seeks to do something that is known and well defined, then this should be carried out with dispatch. We've always stood for that. For example, consider the way we have run our school. We have never allowed the school to be run in a lackadaisical manner. We never said, "Somebody, sometime will come up with a way to answer the mail; let it stack up till this happens." We collect the mail and answer it every day, using a specified procedure designed by the School Meeting and the Office Clerk, and it gets done. There is a specified way to answer the phone, and a specified way to clean the school, and take care of the grounds. Insofar as the school deals with known things, we have always stood for dealing with them through a technological use of time. The same has always been part of our attitude toward enrollees. If anyone says they want technical training in using a certain tool, for example in learning how to type, we don't sit them in front of a typewriter and tell them to be creative. It is interesting to note how the new "creative" approach to education differs from us. What do "progressive educators" do with children and typewriters? They sit them in front of the machines, and they play around, and eventually they are supposed to develop a "positive" attitude toward typing and somehow, somewhere along the line, someone will sneak in typing lessons. In our school, if somebody says they want to learn how to type, we throw a typing manual at them and say, "sit down and practice." There is one way to type, the standard touch system, and you practice it fifteen minutes a day for several months until you get enough speed and it's automatic. Period. So that's one half the answer. A parent comes up and says, "Is my child going to make good use of his time?" Half of the answer is, "If your children are going to want to make a technological use of their time, then they will find that the school's approach is going to be technological." Our attitude will be that they should do it efficiently. We are not going to try to fool them into wasting their time about it and doing it in a roundabout way.

On the other hand, the answer to the other half of the question is quite different. If the student doesn't have a technological goal — if they say, for example, that they want to get themselves together to find out what they want to do in life, that they want to work out what their relationship is to themselves, to their parents, to the culture — these are the non-technological aspects of life, and to these there is only one good use of time, a non-technological one. You can't say to a person in that position, "We will give you three months to figure out your attitude toward life," or "We will let you come here for a year, and if after a year you can pull yourself together, then we will let you come again; if not, it's been a waste of time and money."

It should be clear that the only situation where one can be subjected to a time deadline is a technological situation. If a person comes here to learn to do woodworking, and if we know that a normal apprenticeship in woodworking takes a year, then we can be tested on that. And if the person doesn't come out a woodworker because we are dragging our feet and not providing the tools or instruction, then we have failed. By the same token, if the student poses a question that is not routine, we have got to make it clear that the answer is not going to be routine. The only possible good use of time in that case is not to consider time at all in the process.

In summary, I think that somehow it has got to be clear that we recognize in this school the dual sides of the culture. We respect them both. We don't scorn the technological side of time when it's applied to technological uses. On the other hand, we do not make routine demands in the area of creative work; parents mustn't and students themselves mustn't either. Only if we recognize this dichotomy, only when we give each aspect of time its due, will we be able to give a clear answer to the question, "When do people make good use of their time in the school?"

Doing "Nothing" at School: A Lesson from History

Daniel Greenberg

There are still many parents of Sudbury Valley students who are not comfortable with the idea that their children do not spend time at school "taking courses," covering the same academic subjects other children study at other schools.

There are even several SVS students, mostly children of those parents, who feel guilty about not doing at SVS what their peers are doing at other schools.

Despite over twenty years of experience with our program, and despite an extraordinary track record for our former students, and despite a great deal of literature explaining the educational philosophy of the school and the socio-economic background of what we are doing — despite all this, the same old worry persists, seemingly impervious to any form of comforting, like some sort of stubborn virus, that yields to no medicine.

Why?

I have been agonizing over this for a while now, and the answer I come up with is always the same: I don't really know. Except that it is a cliche among historians that significant change always takes a great deal of time to catch on. And, more important, it takes forever for people to grasp that the future is already here, and that they have been living in the past.

It's natural. At any given time in our adult lives, we can only look back for guidance into the past. As long as the world is turning quietly on its axis, with change occurring ever so gently and slowly, the past differs little in substance from the present or future. In such times — indeed, for most of history — there is no need to accommodate to sudden, unexpected change.

For us who live in the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the situation is not so peaceful. Ours has been a time of obvious upheaval, of major revolutionary change everywhere, in every facet of life. We are all at sea in one way or another, and many of us seek a haven in the past, not knowing how to deal with the startling, unfamiliar trends towards the future.

Those who persist in using the past as a safe guide will continue to be insecure about everything radically new: computers, atomic weapons, revolutionary movements, worldwide alliances, rootlessness, material abundance, planetary despoliation — and schools like Sudbury Valley. Those who look to old forms to show them how to deal with new realities will remain puzzled and confused by their continuing failure to cope. They will continue to wonder why the old ways of communicating are obsolete, why conventional wars don't work (as the U.S. learned in Vietnam, and the Russians had to relearn in Afghanistan, and who knows how many generals will have to learn again and again), why overt oppression doesn't quell extremism, etc. etc. — and they will continue to be at a loss to figure out why conventional schools, despite the ever-increasing funds poured into them, don't produce people prepared to face the new world into which they are being born.

I don't know how to help people cut loose from the past, but recently I realized that, for schools, an analogy exists that might be helpful. It is a historical lesson from the fairly recent past, as history goes; and even though the lessons of history seem no easier to learn than any other lessons, this particular analogy may serve to bring home the point that the kind of activity that takes place at Sudbury Valley should really be supported wholeheartedly by family and friends, not undermined with questions and doubts.

Here it is.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, this country was undergoing its transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial society. (I have written at length about this in the book *A New Look at Schools*, published by the SVS Press.) At that time, throughout most of the country, children grew up on farms or in the wilds, and their education consisted mostly of learning through apprenticeship to their elders. From an early age, usually four or five years old, until their late teens, they became adept at the many complex and sophisticated skills needed to survive when living off the land. That this process of education through life experience worked well is obvious, since it made possible the settlement of our continent and the prosperity of our nation.

Those few people who realized that the pre-industrial age was coming to a rapid close in America, and that a new industrial reality was taking shape, knew that a successful transition could only take place if children grew up adept at the skills that the new era demanded. All of the noble arts of agriculture and backwoods survival were of little practical use in the coming world of manufacture. More important, the industrial era would radically diminish the number of people needed on farms, so that children who grew up with pre-industrial skills would be essentially useless in the new economy, unless they were trained properly.

Clever analysts at the time understood that industrializing America required a mass educational system for children, beginning at the earliest age practicable (about six years old) and continuing as long as necessary (through age twelve for everybody, much longer for those who could go on). The system would have to guarantee a mass of graduates who could successfully man the industrial economy, and who therefore needed to know — you guessed it — the "three 'R's". So the schools were set up everywhere, and educators made huge efforts to get parents to cooperate and send their children for a modern, nineteenth-century education.

And this is where the analogy to SVS, and today's transition, comes in. If you study the literature of a century and a half ago, you see that the most common complaint of parents who were pressured to send their children to school was *that school was a complete waste of time, since the kids did nothing useful, but instead sat around and played all day, with storybooks and numbers and drawing letters and other such nonsense.* It was painfully obvious to these parents that the children who went to school were not learning anything really productive, and that when they graduated the children were not fit for animal husbandry, or for raising crops, or for building structures, or for hunting or trapping — for anything useful! The resentment against the new schools was tremendous, and was almost exclusively based on the feeling that children were being encouraged in these industrial-era schools to be lazy, and would consequently be unprepared for the real world of hard knocks in the American heartland.

I think the best summary of how people felt about the new schools was spoken by some eminent Native American leaders, back in the late eighteenth century, when they were offered a modern education for their children by forward-looking European colonists. Benjamin Franklin recorded their reply:

> *. . . our ideas of [industrial age] education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some experience of it; several of our young people were formerly brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counsellors; they were totally good for nothing. We are however not the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them.*

Does this provide a little perspective for people today? I hope so. The most common complaint against Sudbury Valley is that the children do "nothing" all day but play or "sit around." What students really do here is not measurable by the same standards as used in industrial-age schools — that is, in all the other schools around. Just as what children did in the new industrial schools was not measurable by the same standards used in pre-industrial child-rearing. This should ring a lot of bells with a lot of parents (and students) at SVS. At the very least, it should remind us all that we can't judge activities that are appropriate for the future by standards that have prevailed in the past. We *must* be able to break away from old forms, even if we are unable to appreciate the usefulness or validity of the new ones; even if the new ones seem unproductive, lazy play . . .

So next time you anxiously press your children to "just try" some standard academic classes at SVS, stop for a moment, and ask yourself whether you really ought to; ask yourself whether, 150 years ago, you might have been standing there asking your children to "just try" to get some real-life farm training, instead of all those idle hours spent at the new-fangled school playing with letters and numbers.

Then, having stopped to ask yourself that question, stop yourself from asking your children anything further about "useful work" at SVS.

It's hard to do, but that was the whole point of enrolling them at SVS in the first place, wasn't it? Wasn't it to put them in an environment that looks ahead, way ahead into the future?

Snapshots

Hanna Greenberg

People often ask me why I love to spend my time at the Sudbury Valley School. Following are three vignettes that are good examples of the kind of relationships that the adults and children develop over the years.

(1) This happened a long time ago but is still fresh in my memory. The person in question, age ten or so, was punished for some mischief he caused after hours. He was not allowed to stay in the building after 5:00 p.m. and so was obliged to wait for his ride outside. On the day of the incident I was closing school and doing the trash. At 5:00 he asked me for special dispensation to stay indoors because it was raining. Being both pragmatic and soft-hearted, I said, "I will let you stay if you help with the trash." He replied: "I would help you with the trash but I don't believe in bribery, so I will wait outside."

(2) I was talking to three little kids about five years old. One said, "Oh, Hanna, you are so nice, you are my favorite staff member." Then another said, "Not mine. I love Joan the best." After the first shock, I felt very flattered that the child felt comfortable enough to tell

me the truth, so I ventured to ask her, "I thought you like Marj a lot?" She answered, "Oh yes, I like Marj better than you too, but Joan is my favorite."

(3) One teenager asked me to teach an algebra class. I replied that I had never taught algebra before and was not sure if I could teach it well. She said to me, "I think that you should do it with us. This way you will learn and next time you will know how to do it. Won't that make you feel good?" Of course I am teaching algebra and we all enjoy it very much.

I like to spend my days with people who are honest and vital, whose hearts are filled with love and optimism.

One of the things I enjoy most about working at SVS is the conversations I have with students and sometimes parents. Sometimes a kid will say something in two sentences that I have been trying to articulate for years and spend hours talking about.

One girl, aged about ten, had a hard time adjusting to the school. She wanted to be here, but it was clear to us and to her parents that the going was rough. We, the adults, thought that she missed her old friends, or perhaps felt shy. It turned out to be nothing of the sort.

Here is what she said: "In my other school, they showed you things and you did them, but here you get an empty canvas and you have to fill it yourself with your life."

Now I have tried to explain for years that we feel that each child has a different way of learning, has different needs, different talents, etc., but this little girl said it better than I ever did — and I am glad to report that she is filling her canvas very beautifully.

Sudbury Valley's Secret Weapon: Allowing People of Different Ages to Mix Freely at School

Daniel Greenberg

For a long time I had the strong conviction that age mixing, which is one of the most obvious features of Sudbury Valley, is among the most important educational components of the school (as well as being required by its democratic principles). But whenever I tried to explain it, I couldn't quite put into words why I felt that it played such a central role in the way children learn and develop. However I had an experience that galvanized the entire concept for me. Not that the experience itself was especially unique but, as I will soon relate, it had certain characteristics that finally put all the pieces rather abruptly into place. Perhaps the best thing is to relate the experience first, and then go back and trace my thinking from the beginning.

What happened was simply that I was present when a play group was being organized for children about three years old. A bunch of three year olds were playing around in and out of the house of one of the parents, and my own three year old was one of them.

What I saw was a lot of activity, but almost all of it individual activity. The children were apparently playing together, except that when you looked closely you saw that what was happening was that they were obviously enjoying each others' company and that they were interested in being near each other, but they were playing together *separately*. Each one was riding his or her own pedal car or tricycle and making a lot of noise and looking toward the other, but there was no joint activity, nothing in which they collaborated was taking place. Also, there was a lot of noise. There was also one other feature that is pervasive in nursery schools, though I must say very few observers mention it. A lot of the activity was markedly repetitious, rutted. Somebody would ride back and forth, back and forth, with a big smile, and somebody would sing for an inordinate length of time, always the same thing. Interestingly the most repetitious activities were those of children who were doing it in each other's presence. Whereas the child who might be staying completely alone in a different part of the house would be doing something original and varied. All these kinds of activity are very common to all such groups, but for some reason the events of this particular day triggered a train of thought in my mind that made many things fall into place. So let me proceed with some more general observations.

If you look around at society at large, or any segment of it, you cannot fail to notice that segregation by age, or by skill, or by ability, is not a prevalent phenomenon. Adults pay very little attention to these factors when they interact with other adults. Whether you are looking at a business or a store or a university or whatever, the adult population is most diverse: there are some people on the verge of retirement, some in their forties, some in their twenties just starting out, and they all are participating together in the enterprise.

I know of no enterprise that has the kind of segregation that is common in schools.

Indeed, if you think about this matter as it applies to society at large, it starts to give you some insight about what's going on in educational institutions. In the everyday institutions populated by adults, it is generally accepted that it's a good thing if there's a lot of contact and communication between people who have different degrees of experience in life and different degrees of ability in their work. It's a good thing for the enterprise. It's something beneficial. If people thought it was better for such intermingling not to happen, they would prevent it from happening.

Now, I suspect that most people simply accept this because that's what they're used to, and that very few people who run businesses or enterprises of any kind have thought through why they let people mix freely; that's the way it has always been and that's the way it is. But whether or not people know why it is good, it is a common feature of our rather successful society, and it is this fact that I want to file as background for later reference.

Let us proceed to the central point: What is it that goes on when a child grows up and learns how to cope with the world? I think it is rather broadly agreed that the essence of the process of maturation is the development by the child of the ability to form a world view; to come to grips with the world; to solve problems; somehow to find a place in the world; to get enough of a sense of identity to be able to interact with the world. There are many different ways of saying it. Basically, growing up is acquiring the ability to cope with the surroundings, rather than acquiring a set of static abilities that you live with the rest of your life. Modern thinkers tend to see life as an ongoing interaction between an organism and the world around it. Life is not something that takes on a set form when you become an adult and then just plays itself out; that is more typical of the view held in the past. Now, life is viewed much more as a process. To reach maturation means that you finally attain the ability, more or less, to go on coping day after day, year after year, in a creative, successful, imaginative way, with the ever-changing world surrounding you.

The difference between a mature person and an immature person is that an immature person still is lacking much of this ability, still has trouble getting a handle on things. The mature person supposedly has developed the ability to find ways of dealing with the world around, solving the problems it presents, and creating structures within which the person can function.

Since adulthood is an ongoing process of dealing with the world, learning and development can be seen to be the acquirement of the skills needed to be an adult. The focus is therefore on becoming a successful problem solver and builder of models of reality. A successful adult is a person who can do these things well, can take a problem, think about it, analyze it, and somehow come up with a solution that is valid within that person's model of reality. To function successfully throughout life one has to have the ability to build models that make sense out of reality.

Given this view of what the process of life is, the question of education — or of childhood in general — is how does a child develop the ability to do these things, and what is the best educational environment in which to develop these skills? How do you become a good problem solver? How do you become a good model builder?

One of the ways is by studying the responses of other people in situations similar to the ones you are in. A person learns not only by making everything up from scratch, but by looking around and observing and studying and thinking about how other people deal with the world. That's where age mixing comes in. A person who grows up absolutely alone in a totally isolated environment is obviously going to have a completely different way of functioning as an adult than a person who has grown up in a social environment. Indeed, one of the functions of social interactions in a society is to provide alternate life models for the people in the society to study constantly.

Now, when you are an adult, you know this. You are constantly looking around at your colleagues, peers, neighbors, etc. I'm not talking about "followers" or authority-worshippers. Even - or especially - the most highly original and creative adult is constantly looking around at other people and wondering how they approach things, or what they see in life; and constantly striving to learn from these alternative models, and to integrate them into the person's world view in order to use them somehow for his or her own benefit.

What is true of adults is doubly true of children. A child, who doesn't yet have the skills for coping on her own, looks at alternative models around her not only to see what they are, but to educate herself into the very mechanisms of model building.

That's a rather intricate second-order concept. Let me see if I can make it clearer with some examples. Say I'm studying physics. As a practicing physicist I will be interested in what other practicing physicists do in order to see what kind of theories they use, what kind of formulas they apply to a given situation, what sort of experiments they design and so forth. But a child interested in a physics problem looks at what others are doing not primarily to find out what kinds of theories and formulas they will apply to a situation, but to learn *what kind of thought processes* are involved in physics. What manner of problem solving is physics? There's a real distinction here. The distinction is between, on the one hand, *knowing* what physics is about and looking around you to see what kind of physics other people are doing and, on the other hand, *trying to find out* what physics is about.

This is just an example of what is going on all the time with a developing child. Unfortunately this is a distinction that has been missed in the educational literature, even by people who write about process and problem solving. The child is not ready to learn simply how to solve problems. He or she has to learn first the fundamental frameworks within which the kind of problem solving adults do takes place. What is the nature of physics? What is the nature of biological thought? What is the nature of historical analysis? The developing child with an interest in politics is not first and foremost concerned with distinguishing between how different politicians deal with problems. That is the concern of adults. But the child is trying first to comprehend how politicians approach problems in the first place. What is the nature of the political thought process? Until one has a grasp on what goes into making a political decision one is not going to be able to think about whether A is a better solution than B.

This subtle difference is the key to everything. The child is trying to understand the nature of model building, the nature of problem solving, the nature of the process of life. S/he's not simply concerned with weighing alternate models and alternate approaches. It's a second order problem that the child has. That's the key to what's wrong with the way our present schools segregate by age or ability.

There are two extreme situations that a child can be in, each of which is a poor situation for learning. One extreme is that the child is limited to being only with adults. For example, the Mark Hopkins ideal, one child with one adult on the opposite end of the log. Here you have the generation gap with a vengeance. The adult is an adult already; a person exploring a wide variety of problem solving techniques, world models and so forth. And if the adult is really a mature, intelligent, well-developed person, he or she will be really adept at it, constantly weighing alternatives and coming up with creative new ideas. The child, by contrast, has a very poorly formed idea of how to go about these processes, as I have said. So here the child is, stuck with an adult partner, and the adult doesn't begin to understand why the child is having such a hard time. The adult may really be interested in the child, trying constantly to explain what the adult is doing. The more the adult explains to the child, the less the child understands. Because the child's problem is the lack of a common line of communication with the adult. They are not talking on the same level.

Any adult who has spent a lot of time talking to children will have these frustrations. This is the chief problem in teaching any subject. For instance, you get a bunch of freshman college physics students and then you put a college professor in with them, and the college professor may be just as patient as can be, explaining the same material fifty-eight times. But the problem isn't that the student doesn't understand the words, or has trouble copying them down. The problem is that the freshman doesn't understand what the physicist's way of approaching the world is. No matter how many times the teacher repeats a particular physical theory, it is lacking any foundation in the world view of the student. So there's no communication and nothing ever happens in the student's mind. That is such a common phenomenon that it's pathetic. It's not a generation gap because of age; it's a question of talking at two different levels. You can be the best pedagogue in the world. You can try every trick. But you never really get around it. Ultimately what happens in that kind of situation is that the child eventually grows up; the person somehow creates in his or her own mind an idea of what it is that the physicist is doing. In some cases this can be a very fantastic idea. You do get people who have the most bizarre notions of what history or physics or philosophy or any other subject is about. When you look into it a little, you usually find out that they have such bizarre notions because of the gap I have just described between them and their mentors throughout their youth. In fact, this happens very often with people who have grown up in families with highly intellectual parents. The children often come up with the strangest notions precisely because the parents have been "wonderful" parents, explaining things year after year, and the children never really caught on.

The other extreme that is equally destructive to a normal mental development is segregating children, for example by age. This essentially means putting all children together who are at the same level of development. Nowadays this is done with a vengeance in schools; educators are no longer satisfied with grade levels that are determined by age. If you simply determine grades by age you don't really get children grouped according to their developmental level, so most modern educators have a whole series of tests to enable them to put everybody together at the same developmental age. And they consider this a great step forward.

That's even more cruel to a child because here everybody is in the same trouble and nobody can help each other out. They don't even have the benefit of any successful models around them. They have to try to find out how to develop the ability and the skill and the framework and the methodology of coping with the world on their own. They are at a double disadvantage.

Now what people do in regular school is combine the two cruel extremes. Neither extreme happens very often by itself, but in the schools we make the combination of the extremes happen regularly. In other words, the way this society's educational system is conceived is to take a bunch of children who are at the same developmental age, and then stick them in a room together with an adult. This combines the worst features of both situations. On the one hand everybody is at a loss, because all they see is the adult and they don't learn from the adult anything about the second order processes. On the other hand when they turn around and try to get help from their neighbor they can't because the neighbor is in the same boat as they are. So it's the most frustrating possible situation. And that to me is the key, that phrase "the most frustrating situation."

The psychological manifestations that occur in schools and in play groups or whatever are almost textbook manifestations of frustration. What happens when you are terribly frustrated? For one thing, you become angry. Anybody who walks into any school immediately feels a tremendous amount of unspecific anger and hostility. The unspecific nature of the hostility is crucial. They are not angry at a social wrong; theirs is not a rational anger, because something specific happened that they are upset about. Rather, they are overwhelmed by an unspecific anger directed abroad in a scatter-shot fashion.

The companion to this anger is unspecific anxiety. Not anxiety, for instance, because your mother just left and you don't know when she'll come back, which is specific anxiety and rationally based. In unspecific anxiety, you are anxious, but you don't know why. Frustration is just the kind of thing that produces unspecific anxiety. And if you are frustrated about problem solving, you are frustrated at the most fundamental level of your mental process. You just can't get a handle on the things that your mind wants to do most of all, namely, to solve problems and build models. You are not managing to do it, you are not getting any help from your colleagues, who are in the same boat, nor from your teachers, who can't reach you. And you are just plain frustrated at not making adequate progress.

Unspecific hostility. Unspecific anxiety. And the third manifestation is what I will call incipient autism. By this I mean the beginning of inward-turning, the creation of a barrier of alienation from the rest of the world. Behavior that manifests itself in early years as rutted, routine, repeated behavior that follows a set pattern time and again. The difference between the early years and the later years is that in the early years the motor responses haven't yet been suppressed. So that early incipient autism often shows itself as routine motor behavior. Later, as society manages to control this kind of behavior, it gets shut down. "Don't yell." "Don't run around." "Don't make a lot of noise." So by the time we come around to a slightly later age, the same category of behavior becomes a dulled turning-off.

These, then, are three characteristics that, I submit, are very widespread in groups that are segregated by age or developmental level. All three arise from the frustration of not being able to get a handle on things.

You just don't see that kind of behavior in children who feel that they can deal with their surroundings. You see precisely the opposite — exuberant activity, eagerness to get on with the job, eagerness to go on to the next thing. Which brings me around pretty much to the point of the whole thing. Having talked about the two bad extremes and their combination as presently found in the regular schools, I think that it is obvious why I think that free age mixing is such a critical factor at Sudbury Valley. It is the key to everything else. Free age mixing provides a free flow of interaction among people at different points along the maturation process. It enables you, as you are growing toward adulthood, always to find somebody in *both* directions. You can find somebody who is just a few steps *ahead* in learning how to deal with the environment (just a *few* steps ahead, and therefore not so far ahead that the person is no longer encountering a lot of the same problems). Somebody who still speaks the same language, who still makes a lot of the same mistakes. But at the same time, someone who has achieved a few of the things that you want to achieve, and since you can talk about 80% of it rather easily (because you are in the same boat for 80% of it), the other 20% becomes an awful lot easier to understand. On the other hand, it is equally important to be able to turn around and find somebody a little behind you. Because you get a handle on your accomplishments and on your maturation by refining them through explaining and re-explaining and making it clear to somebody who is asking you. This is the real meaning of the commonplace saying that teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. They are indeed. It is equally important to have solved a problem and also to be able to verbalize the solution and hone it against somebody who is quizzing you and giving you a hard time about it. And that's what you get when you're able to look to one side and find somebody who is a year or two older than you, and then to the other side and find somebody a year or two younger.

Actually, at Sudbury Valley, a careful study of inter-age contacts would probably yield the classic bell-shaped statistical curve representing the distribution of contacts between the persons at different stages of development. The likelihood is that for the most part children will be communicating with others who are within a narrow range on either side of them, and progressively less time — but *some time* — with people farther and farther away from them on either side. The distant contacts definitely exist, and they serve to accelerate the normal developmental process. Every now and then a person can take a big step very easily. The little steps take up most of the time, but age mixing also allows you to take a lot of very surprising and unpredictable big steps. We find this happening all the time. Suddenly a child of a certain age will hit it off fantastically with somebody five or six years older, or younger. We used to be amazed at this, for example when teenagers would suddenly find real satisfaction out of relating to very young kids. This has nothing to do with maternal or paternal instincts. Rather, this has to do with their finding tremendous value in following through a big step taken across a wide gulf. And just as often, a young child will make a leap in some area and find a common language with somebody who is developmentally way ahead in a certain area.

A lot of people have remarked on the absence of significant cliques at Sudbury Valley. There are friendships, and there are mini-groups, but real cliques are very rare in this school. Since cliques are one of the most common characteristics of ordinary school situations, their relative absence here is all the more remarkable. What accounts for the state of affairs here? The answer is simple: even when you have a group of friends with whom you like to spend most of your time, there is always somebody outside of that group with whom you want to spend some of your time. There is always somebody who has an interest that runs parallel to yours in some other area. As a result, you find children constantly turning outside of their most immediate friendship group in order to develop some area that they don't share in common with others. Hence, there are no fixed cliques.

Another thing that I think is remarkable in the Sudbury Valley School, and directly related to free age mixing, is the noticeable absence of preening and showing off. Of course, I don't mean to say that it doesn't happen; after all, ours is a society practically indoctrinated to show off. But when you look at the school you can't help but noting how high a percentage of the interactions do not have showing off, or even jealousy, as one of their prime characteristics. Why?

The answer is directly related to age mixing. Showing off, and jealousy, is practically forced upon people trapped in a narrow age group; it's a matter of establishing the pecking order of the group. You are all in the same boat, and so all that's left to you is to fight with each other to establish physical or psychological supremacy. At Sudbury Valley, a lot of the point is taken out of it. I mean, who are you going to show off to? What's the point of it? I'm not talking here in moral terms. I'm talking about what in fact happens in the learning interactions. Here, everybody knows and is quick to acknowledge that everybody is ignorant. For example, what would be the point of a child showing off that the s/he knows how to read well? The person knows that s/he can't read as well as a person three or four years older, with whom s/he is constantly interacting. Age mixing takes away the necessity to show off, because age mixing is predicated on the healthy human motivation of learning from any available source. A person who is healthy will always want to learn from whomever there is around who can teach anything that will help the person develop. And satisfaction is gotten from accomplishment, not from preening.

I would like to end by returning to where I started. Everything that I said as applied to school age children becomes extremely vivid when you see it in three year olds. Three year olds are still in a very rudimentary stage of developing their basic communication skills. Now if you can't even communicate easily with the other person, your frustration level is redoubled. Because not only are you all in the same boat, but you can't even talk to each other in the same boat. So what you have is a bunch of children who can't even express to each other that they want to do the things that they are capable of doing together; they can't even express to each other that they want to do things on their own level. They know what they want to do, they have a picture of it, but they can't get the message through. So when there are just three year olds together and not a lot of other children around to help them, there are no bridges in the communication among them.

There we were, sitting together, a bunch of three year olds and a bunch of adults. The adults couldn't cross this communication gap because, as I have explained, there was no way I could effectively talk with another three year old whom I never met before. He didn't trust me. He didn't know me. I didn't understand him. He didn't understand me. It was unbearable. However, had there been a few four or five year olds in there, the whole picture would have been different. Those problems would not have occurred. They could have communicated to the four years olds. The four year olds would have been the bridge. Older children are well known to be the perfect bridge of communication among little children, and between little children and adults.

The free age mixing at the Sudbury Valley School has to be somehow explained to people who come and observe what we're doing. I'm afraid this is a very hard task, because the general educational system is so polarized in the opposite direction. But it is important for us to do because, in purely educational terms, we reap very important educational benefits from this age mixing. It greatly hastens the maturation and development of the children who are in the school, especially those who have started young.

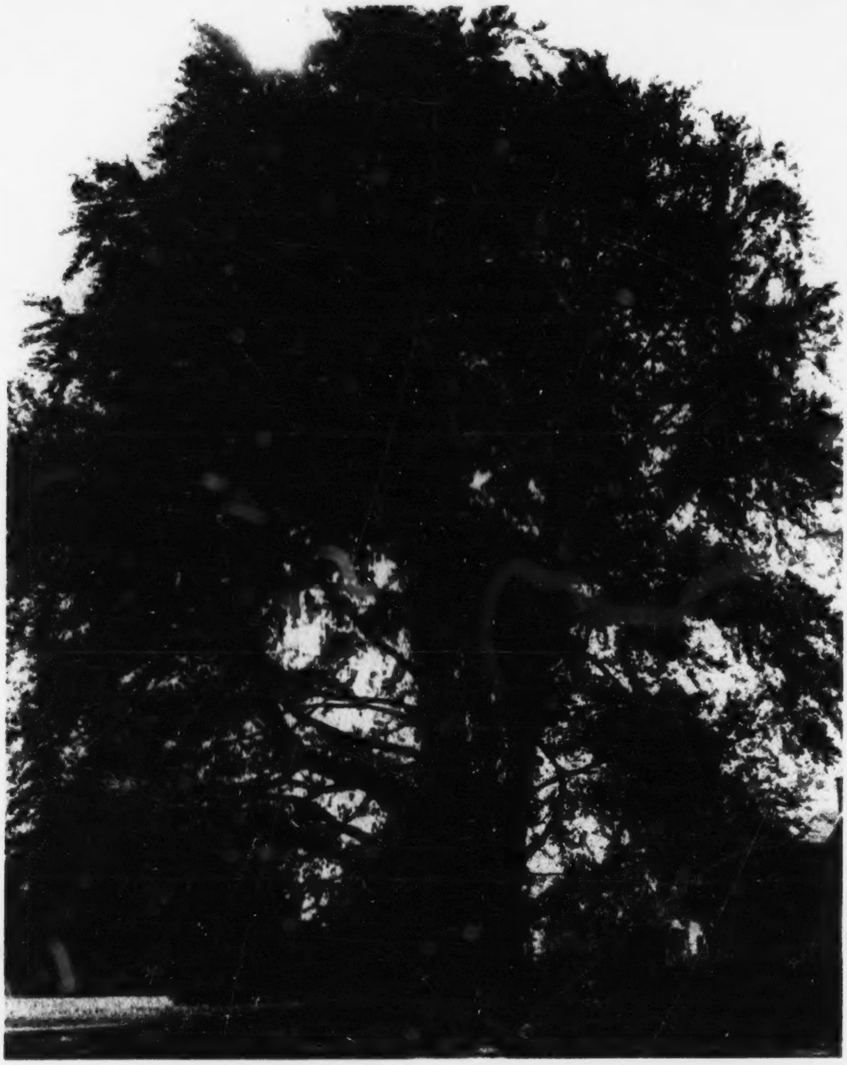
In a way, this is noticed by many people who visit. They remark on the result without understanding one of the major causes. They will remark on the fact that it is amazing that our ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen year olds are so developed, so mature. Adults are able to communicate with them and talk to them, which means that they are much farther along in becoming comparable to adults in their model building and problem solving abilities than ten, eleven, or twelve year olds are in the society at large. As I see it, this is a direct result of the effect that free age mixing has on the children at this school.

The Beech Tree

Hanna Greenberg

On a glorious morning one Fall I "saw" the beech tree for the first time. That seems an amazing statement coming from a person who has been at SVS for so many years — amazing, but true. Like everyone else, I have seen the tree in the Fall when its leaves turn red and are then shed, letting the branches show their magnificent structure throughout the Winter. I have also witnessed a new growth of Spring when the budding leaves give the tree a pink halo and slowly turn to their deep green color. I have also seen generation after generation of little children learn to climb the mighty tree, going higher and higher, sometimes reaching its crown and perching there for hours. But it was only recently that I really "saw" the tree, really understood it. Being an adult, I did not know how to truly experience the tree, until a little girl taught me how. This is what happened.

One day, Naomi, her face beaming, announced to me (like many little ones before her) that she finally was able to climb into the beech tree all by herself. She said that Alison had taught her how, and now she would show me. I went out with her because I wanted to share her joy and because the morning was so brilliant with vivid colors and luxuriant sunlight shimmering in the dew on the red and yellow leaves. Naomi showed me how she climbed and came down, and then told me to follow suit. Now, I had helped scores of children get up and many more to get down when they felt stuck, but I had never attempted to climb the tree myself. Naomi does not take "no"



readily, and I knew that if I was to retain her respect for me, I just had to perform for her! She very patiently and clearly showed me, step by step, how to climb up and how to get down, and I did it for the first time ever.

When I got up to the first level I was struck by the beauty of the perch. I am not able to describe the mighty branches, the cozy space or the feelings of awe that overcame me. Suffice it to say that I realized that I had "seen" the tree for the first time. We adults think of ourselves as knowledgeable, and of our children as needing to learn and to be taught, but in this case I'd bet that any kid at SVS would be amazed at our ignorance and insensitivity to the grandeur that is there for us to see and is ignored. Naomi was a good teacher and I will always be grateful for what she taught me.

How the School is Governed; Who Cares?

Daniel Greenberg

I thought you might like to know how the school is run.

Actually, you probably wouldn't, if you're like most people. That sobering fact came as something of a disappointment to us many years ago, after we had spent countless hours singly, in various groups, with lawyers, etc. over a period of years, all for the noble purpose of setting up a system of government inbred with lofty ideals and profound political principles. We never tired of refining our thoughts, and we still continue to do so. At first, we thought everyone else was just as interested in these matters. It didn't take us long to find out they weren't.

Anyway, when you think about it, it's not all that surprising. Most everybody in this country is ferociously committed to the fundamental principles on which our nation has been founded, as they understand these principles. But how many people have the foggiest notion of the details of government? Do you know the various functions of the Town Meeting, the Moderator, the Standing Committees, the Selectmen, the County Government, the Regional

Water and School Districts, the State Government and Agencies, the Federal Government and Agencies, the District Court, Superior Court, Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, Land Court, Maritime Court, Tax Court, Federal District Court, etc., etc., etc.? For most of our lives we get along fine without any idea of what all these arms of governance do. When we occasionally run afoul of them, or need them, we get a quick education.

Well, I just thought you might be curious about the school. If you aren't, stop reading. If you are, I'll take you through a short thumbnail sketch of how we operate.

The school as a legal entity is a Massachusetts Corporation, The Sudbury Valley School, Inc. Because it is a non-profit corporation, there are no shareholders. Instead, the Corporation consists of the school's Assembly which, under the by-laws, is made up of students, staff, parents, trustees, and specially elected public members. (You can get a copy of the By-laws by asking in the office.) The Assembly meets regularly twice a year, in the late Spring, and determines all the school's basic policies, the annual budget, salary scales, tuition, the award of diplomas, and the Officers and Trustees. The agenda of the Assembly is published in advance and mailed to all members. Any Assembly member can put an item on the agenda by mailing it to the Secretary of the Corporation, c/o the office; items (with a few exceptions) can also be brought up on the floor of the meeting for discussion and vote.

The Officers of the Corporation are a President, who presides at meetings of the Assembly and Trustees, and whose most important power is that of calling special meetings when he sees fit; a Treasurer and a Secretary, both of whose functions are the standard ones implied by their titles.

Every year the Assembly also elects a Board of Trustees which, unlike virtually all other schools and corporations, in our case has no *power* at all. Rather, the Board is our advisory panel, studying as best it can the various questions referred to it by the Assembly and reporting back to the Assembly when it is ready to do so. The number of Trustees is currently limited by the By-laws to a maximum of twenty. As a matter of tradition, Trustees meetings are open to all Assembly members to attend and, where possible, advance notice is given of the topic under discussion.

The day-to-day life of the school is governed by the School Meeting, both directly and through its various agents.

The School Meeting consists of all the people at school on a day-to-day basis — namely, all students and staff, each of whom has a vote. (As a practical matter, students greatly outnumber the staff. This really keeps the staff on its toes. Any staff member wishing to promote a particular scheme has to have facts and arguments carefully honed to convince a majority of those present and voting, most of whom are usually students, as does any student.) The School Meeting meets every Thursday at 1:00 PM. The meetings are run efficiently and formally according to strict rules of order, with a fixed order of agenda. The agenda is always published in advance and is called the School Meeting Record.

The School Meeting has full operational authority to run the school, subject only to the policies set forth by the Assembly. The School Meeting does it all: it spends the money, hires (and fires) the staff, passes all the school rules (the permanent rules are codified in the

School Meeting Law Book which can be obtained through the office), oversees discipline, and sets up all sorts of administrative entities to keep things running smoothly. It is presided over by the School Meeting Chairman who is effectively the school's Chief Executive Officer. In the early years, the Chairman was almost always a staff member, but since 1973 Chairpersons have been students. The School Meeting also elects a Secretary to keep records.

School Meetings are open (except on rare occasions; they are closed, for example, when there is a personal discussion involving a particular student). You should attend one some day — it is the heart of the school and is an amazing institution to observe.

To keep all the myriad activities of the school running smoothly, the School Meeting creates Clerks, Committees, and School Corporations. (These are all spelled out in detail in the Law Book and in a Management Manual kept in the office.)

Clerks are basically administrative officers. For example, there is an Attendance Clerk who supervises attendance records, after hours use of the building, keys, etc. There is a Grounds Clerk who takes care of the grounds, a Buildings Maintenance Clerk who takes care of the buildings, and so on. When the School Meeting creates a Clerkship, it spells out the officer's exact powers and duties and confers its authority on the Clerk within the domain it has defined.

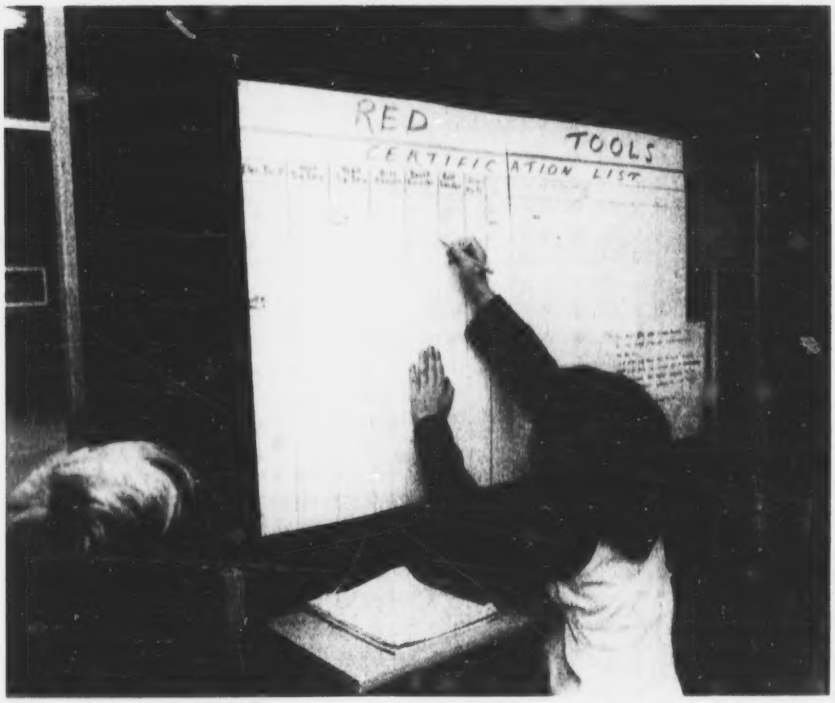
Committees take care of broader tasks. For example, the Aesthetics Committee takes care of all matters relating to the school's appearance, interior and exterior design, furnishings, exhibits/art work, cleanliness.

School Corporations are formal interest groups. They are Sudbury Valley's equivalent of Departments at other schools. For example, there is a Woodworking Corporation which takes care of all woodworking activities; a Photolab Corporation; and so forth. Corporations are chartered for a specific set of purposes by the School Meeting and given certain powers. Funds are channeled through the Corporations to support various educational activities. The great advantage School Corporations have over Departments is that the former can be formed and disbanded according to the needs and interests of the students, while the latter, unlike old soldiers, never die or fade away, but just keep rolling along. (I was once associated with a Physics Department at a prestigious women's college that occupied half a floor of a four-story building, even though there were *no* physics majors any more — it was just a left-over from fifty years earlier!)

The school's disciplinary problems are taken care of in the context of the Judicial System established by the School Meeting. (The principles underlying the school's judiciary are discussed in detail in "On Law and Order" in this book.) The details of the system are, again, spelled out in the Law Book.

Despite the great variety of activities, and the full latitude and respect accorded to individual interests and rights, the school runs extremely smoothly. And despite the fact that, since the school's founding, the cost of living has multiplied several times, the operating expenses of the school have not grown in real dollars, thanks to the incredible — and I mean *incredible* — wisdom and frugality of the School Meeting.

Well, that's the thumbnail sketch I promised. If you've read this far, you know the basics of how the school works. Anything more, by way of detail or philosophical justification, you have to get by asking. We'll welcome the opportunity to talk with you.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When You Think of the School Meeting, What Passes Through Your Mind? (A Former Student's Answer)

Laura Ransom

For me, the Sudbury Valley School Meeting had one outstanding feature which sticks in my memory. It was one of the rare settings in my life in which my ideas were considered without regard to my age, sex, relative experience or status in the group. The concept of the School Meeting was to "address one's remarks to the chair," depersonalizing them, focusing on content. While some found this lacking in warmth, it meant that the ideas were discussed with an absence of sexism or patronization. I rarely had the feeling of being indulged, which, as a young woman, I had experienced so often. The structure demanded that the ideas, motions and problems be confronted apart from the personalities involved, a separation that made possible the development of genuine political equality. As has often been noted, this did not mean that we came to the meetings all equally prepared or educated or with the same influence on each other. We came, thank goodness, some wiser and some more foolish, some educated in the lessons of history and some wanting to live for the moment. Some earned a respect which let them present their intuitions, unsubstantiated, and sway a vote, and some came with carefully reasoned arguments and lost because they could not persuade a majority that their cause was worthwhile. Political equality and fairly conducted meetings were no insurance that we would be equally wise or equally successful in convincing the School Meeting to do what we wanted. But we very clearly were offered an equal chance, an equal opportunity.

The second point, and for me personally the more important one, was that we had to give the same opportunity to others. Some members of the meeting spoke with eloquence and insight, others were boring, obnoxious and rude. We had to listen to them, too, if we wanted silence while we spoke. Occasionally members presented the same motions time and again, reintroducing ideas which had been overwhelmingly rejected and stirring up seemingly endless debate. They had a right to the forum and to a vote on their ideas. On the more serious side, some students and occasionally staff engaged in obvious, direct, power plays challenging the School Meeting's authority. These challenges had to be countered. We had to attempt to put aside our resentment at wasted meeting time, or our perception of the aggressive intent of a particular challenge and attempt to deal only with the issues. Personal comment and directly addressing other people in the room were out of order.

I personally sat on both sides of these issues, as School Meeting member and as chairman one year. I know it was an important experience for me. I can say, however, that at the time I little realized the exceptional situation in which I was involved. I now realize that I have never before or since earned the kind of equality and power and respect that resulted. Then I was mainly aware of the burden of being responsible for the school and for my own corner of the community. Now I know that the investment was hardly excessive in return for the rare opportunity to participate in a community which offers equality in its administration and in its daily life.

Five Myths about Democracy

Daniel Greenberg

"Democracy" seems to mean many things to many people. To the regimes of Eastern Europe it long designated an autocratic one-party rule conducted for the presumed benefit of the masses; to the New Englander it designates universal suffrage in an open town meeting; to the Founding Fathers of this country it designated a complex system of representation and checks and balances. And so it goes. When the Sudbury Valley School was founded as a "democratic school" we naively thought that there would be widespread understanding of what this meant. It turned out that different people had quite different conceptions of what kind of institution a "democratic school" should be, and that even the members of the school community differed considerably on the question.

Does that imply that the word "democracy" is essentially meaningless, and that it cannot be used in ordinary conversation or written communication to convey a definite meaning? I do not think so. I think that there is, in fact, a core of meaning that this word conveys to all who use the English language discriminatingly, and that difficulties arise only through carelessness (or occasionally through conscious deceit). I think that for the most part our own problems with this word in the school arise from our failure to explore its meaning in depth. As a result, we have too often been satisfied with vague definitions that missed the mark and led to controversy.

Instead of trying to refine our conception of democracy by providing a definition of what it means, I shall, in this paper, focus on several things it *does not* mean. Over the years, it has been possible to identify a number of recurring errors that people in and out of the school have been making when they observe our operation, or engage in philosophical discussions. I shall briefly identify five of these errors, in the hope that their elimination will be a constructive step toward the clarity we are seeking.

(1) In a truly democratic school, everyone will participate in decision-making processes.

People ask, "How many persons attend the weekly School Meeting?" as if the important criterion is the attendance level. This is the Voter Participation mentality, that says that a democracy requires full participation in the voting process. In many countries there are laws that require people to vote. The idea seems to be two-fold: the democracy isn't working if everyone doesn't vote; and the citizen who doesn't vote is not a good citizen.

Both premises are wrong. Democracy rests on universal *suffrage*, not on universal participation. What is essential is that each person *have access* to a full share in decision-making. Whether or not one uses that access is a private matter, dependent on a variety of factors. As long as there is true universal access, there is true democracy.

Who actually participates in a given decision is best left up to each individual. As soon as the community forces persons to participate, it is engaging in yet another "do-gooder" activity, like forcing everybody to learn math, or to pray once a day, or to do a good deed a day. Indeed, forcing full participation is a singularly crude invasion of the privacy of each voter: it signifies the community's refusal to respect a person's decision not to vote.

There are many reasons a person may choose not to vote, and all are *a priori* just as valid as a decision to vote. A person may feel not sufficiently well informed to express an opinion on the issue at hand; in this case, forcing the person to vote is a patent disservice to the community. A person may have more pressing business elsewhere. A person may be more interested at the moment in something entirely different; who are we to say that the other interest, if pursued, will be of less value to the community than his or her presence at the meeting or the poll? A person may simply be content, on any particular issue, to abide by the judgment of others — a kind of proxy, certainly a legitimate process.

There is no need to drag on with this catalogue of possibilities. The key idea is simple: True democracy is *universal suffrage*, universal access to the decision-making process; whether or not a given person at a given time uses this access is entirely a matter of that person's own private concern, beyond the realm of public coercion or public judgment.

(2) In a truly democratic school, everyone will take a full share in the daily round of tasks.

People look at the distribution of administrative tasks in the school and ask, "What proportion of the school community takes an active role in running the school?" as if the number of people doing the administrative chores is the key factor. This is the Community Service mentality, that says that everyone ought to "do their share" in performing a certain list of routine services for the community.

Again, this attitude is wide of the mark. Democratic principles require that all persons have an *equal opportunity* to take part in managing community affairs. There must be no barriers of sex, race, age, or of other such artificial and accidental traits. The qualifications required and duties expected for each position should be clearly stated, and each position should be open equally to all those who meet the qualifications and seek to perform the duty. This is the basis of the democratic election process, in which all qualified persons who wish to be placed on the ballot can have their names put in contention. This is, of course, the way the school has always operated.

Whether or not a given individual seeks to take part in the daily administration is a private decision, based on many personal considerations that the community is obligated to respect. Forcing people to assume jobs they do not want is a major invasion of privacy, and should be done only in cases of extreme necessity and demonstrated urgency. (One such instance in our school is the Judicial Committee and the reason this exception was made is a fascinating chapter in the history of the school.)

The fact that, at any given time, only a small number of persons wish to assume tasks that are open to all should not be a matter of concern. Those who choose to abstain from administration may have a host of valid reasons for abstaining. They may be no good at the work — in which case, forcing them to do it would be a real disservice to the school. They may be focussed on other things which will be of much greater service to the school and the community than grudgingly performed administration. They may find administrative tasks repulsive or offensive, in which case forcing them to work would be a serious invasion of their private world, implying that the community has a right to force people to overcome their private dislikes or objections. For example, I happen to think that for some time to come, in the context of the current milieu, most teenagers will find administrative tasks distasteful, and will avoid them at all costs, because these tasks remind them of the kinds of services they have been forced to perform against their wills in non-school situations. As a result, they have come to abhor these tasks, and will avoid them even when no coercion is involved. Of course, there will always be exceptions, and hopefully in the not-too-istant future the exceptions will become the rule.

I do not expect that there will ever be a large percentage of people who will seek to participate in the school's administration, any more than there will ever be a large percentage of people who will seek to study music, or art, or Latin, or physics. To see anything wrong with this state of affairs is to take the point of view, alien to our school's entire outlook, that certain interests are in fact "good" and "important" for everyone to pursue. What *is* important, and has been jealously protected at the school, is the open access to all jobs and all pursuits, on a regularly renewed basis.

(3) In a truly democratic school, where all are treated as equals, all will feel equal.

People ask, "Why does it seem that certain segments of the school population feel inferior to others, or are intimidated by others?" To begin with, the very question itself is an unwarranted invasion of privacy, and enters realms which we have assiduously placed off-limits at the school. As far as our democratic principles are concerned, we have had to make sure that everyone, at every time, and in every situation, is treated even-handedly, with no trace of bias or prejudice of any sort. That is a strong, specific statement of aims, and it is one that we have been careful to live by at all times.

We have never entered into the psyches of School Meeting members, and I hope we never shall. It takes no expertise in psychology to realize that feelings of inadequacy, lack of self confidence, fear, self-deprecation, and other related personality characteristics are not easy matters to understand, and have roots in the full variety of experiences that have impinged on a person from the moment of birth onward. To judge the democratic purity of a school — or a town — by reference to the private psychological worlds of its members is to confuse entirely the private and the public.

People who suffer from psychological problems must themselves be responsible for seeking a remedy. The alternative is to have the community feel responsible for assessing the psychological health of each person, and for setting each person's house in order. I consider this alternative a complete surrender of privacy, and I feel that our country has already gone much too far in this direction. Hopefully, the school will never opt for this path, but will be content with constantly reexamining itself to be sure that the school's operations in no way introduce any objective inequalities in the treatment of various persons.

(4) In a truly democratic school, where all views are aired and debated, decisions will finally be arrived at through consensus.

People ask, "Isn't it a defect of the school that you often have deep and sharp divisions within you, and must often arrive at decisions through a bitterly contested vote?" This attitude reflects a view popular since the Enlightenment, that in an environment of free exchange of ideas, Reason should always guide us to the Best Solution. As applied to the school, the argument of these critics is as follows: "If the school was really as democratic as it claims to be, then all controversies would receive a full, thorough, and dispassionate airing, and in the end the view with the greatest merit and good sense would prevail, by consensus. The fact that the school often has persistent divisions that must be decided by a split vote shows that there is some defect in the democratic process, so that instead of a free airing of ideas, the school is merely getting a power play between factions."

This attitude, though especially popular in these days of consensus, love, encounter groups, team problem solving, etc., nevertheless is essentially in error in its basic assumption that calm reason produces a Best Solution for every problem. In fact, only a minute number of essentially technical problems have a single best solution. The more complex problems of everyday living have a host of solutions, many of them equally good alternatives backed by equally valid arguments. Men of good faith, good intelligence, and sound reason often differ profoundly on which of these alternatives to pursue.

Indeed, the mark of a democracy is the *absence* of consensus. Democratic procedure implies that all the conflicting alternatives be given a full and equal hearing, and be respected and allowed to persist even when their proponents are in the minority. In a democracy, consensus is a rare and short-lived accident, as this country found out in the 1960's. Repeated consensus is always a symptom of powerful communal pressure to force the dissenting minority to abandon its position and accept the prevailing view.

For myself, I always heave a sigh of relief when a hotly contested issue comes to the floor of the School Meeting or the Assembly, because I see in the very existence of such issues a reaffirmation of our adherence to democratic processes.

(5) In a truly democratic school, everyone will be committed to defending the principles and rights on which the school is based.

People say, "If yours is a truly democratic school, every member of the school community would be zealously committed to its survival. The absence of universal commitment is a sign that the school benefits a few people at the expense of the majority." This is the Evangelical viewpoint, that a person who perceives the good must become totally committed to it.

This attitude ignores both history and psychology. There has never in history been a situation where all — or even a major proportion — of those who benefitted from something have been committed to its preservation. On the contrary, our history books are one long chronicle of the opposite thesis: that at any time, in any group, only a small fraction of persons have been devoted to protecting, maintaining, and furthering the good things that the masses were enjoying.

Why this is so is a matter for social scientists to cope with, and is something that they have not even begun to understand. Nor is it even clear that we would ever want to have things different. Often when we come across a community that has a relatively large number of persons committed to preserving its way of life — for example, the homogeneous religious communities of past and present times — we feel that they are not of the character that we would prefer to see in our own surroundings. Indeed, it can be argued that the existence of a large mass of satisfied citizens who are not wholly committed to the struggle to preserve what they have is *a necessary counterweight* to the small number who are committed. Perhaps the satisfied but seemingly indifferent masses are a healthy reminder to all concerned that there exist important things in life other than the ideals to which the few are committed. In this way, perspective can be maintained even while a struggle is being waged.

Five myths — and there are many more. Perhaps if we begin by adequately appreciating the errors of these five, to which so many of us have ourselves fallen prey from time to time, we will be better equipped to deal effectively with other similar errors that perplex us regularly.

Subtleties of a Democratic School

Daniel Greenberg

Certain nuances in the operation of the school have emerged during the years we have been in existence that turn out to be very important in defining the school. A while ago someone gave me a book to read about an alternative school that appeared to him to be very similar to Sudbury Valley. I read the material I had been given, and my first reaction was one of horror, because I found the school described in the book so very different from us that I could not imagine how the person who gave it to me had ever though it was similar. Determined to get to the bottom of the matter, I reread the book and then the answer came to me. So much of the terminology was similar to the terminology that we use, that if you didn't have experience in understanding the subtleties of our school, you could easily get fooled into thinking that the other school was the same. The language was similar; the vocabulary was similar. It took very close reading to see how fundamentally different the two schools were. The more I thought about it the more I became convinced that this whole question is tied up with enrollment too, because I think that the better we are recognized for what we are, the more likely it is that the people who enroll here will really want what we are offering.

One of the key strengths of our school is that it related in a very profound way to American tradition and experience. In *The Crisis in American Education* (Sudbury Valley School Press; Framingham, MA) we talk about this in general terms, but I think there is a lot more to be said on that subject. In many subtle ways this school tunes in on deep elements of the American spirit. This is a source of real strength for us, because it links us intimately with the fate and future of the country as a whole.

I have five items to discuss. In each case, I will define the item, tell why I think it is important to our school, and then compare the situation in other schools.

Political Neutrality

Ours is an apolitical school. It is a school in which we consciously do not pay attention to the political views of the people who seek to become members of the community, where by "political" I mean the standard sense of the term, in its broadest implication. We don't ask about party affiliations, about philosophy, about class, about any of the features that separate political factions in a society. We don't ask about these things, we don't test for them in an indirect way, we don't try to find out about them in a back-handed manner. In addition, we don't allow political activity to take place on the campus. In plain language, we don't allow the school in any way to become involved in political activities in the community.

Our rigorous political neutrality has been put to the test many times. For example, in the beginning, when we first opened, it was simply assumed by members of the so-called "Movement" that we were another "Movement" institution. If we happened to encounter anybody who was involved in the Movement, we would be greeted as "brothers." We would be asked such things as, "When are you planning to have your next rally?" We were approached by people in the community to use the building in support of an election campaign. It was assumed that any "brother" from any part of the country could come and camp out at the school. This was a widespread assumption. When it became clear that regardless of the private political views of the people concerned with the school, the school itself was going to maintain an absolutely rigid political neutrality from the beginning — and this became clear very quickly — we came to be considered enemies of the Movement, and in the Movement literature we were singled out for special ridicule and contempt for our non-political behavior. Finally, we were simply eliminated from the Movement literature. Unfortunately there was a spill-over to the community at large. I think that a lot of the parents in '68 had heard about the school through political connections, and they made the same assumptions. I think that contributed to some of our problems that year, when they found out that we weren't what they expected.

We had other tests of our political neutrality. For example, there were many times when students (it was particularly students, because I think the staff had worked this out, and understood it very well) wanted to have some kind of participation in peace rallies in '68 and thought the school should be involved. Later, there was "Moratorium Day" in October 1969. There was a certain amount of discussion on whether the school should be closed, because everybody was closing. In this connection, it was instructive to see how quickly the concept of political neutrality came to be accepted here. It was really extremely interesting to see that the strongest activists, the people who felt most strongly about their views, simply dropped any attempt to politicize the school, and their arms didn't have to be twisted in any way. They really accepted it once it was explained to them.

Why is it so important? And why did they realize it was important? The reason is embedded deep in the American political spirit, in the idea that people of divergent political and social views can work together in a common enterprise where they have common goals other than politics. This is a deep and uniquely American idea. You don't have to see eye to eye with all your coworkers in order to create a valid enterprise. To be sure, where political issues are concerned, you can seek out your political friends and fight with your political enemies. But an extremely important tradition in this country is that when other matters of concern are at hand, other things that are not inherently political by nature, you don't pay attention to political differences; all people can join hands in the enterprise. This feature was built into the public school system here, a system of education that is an original American conception. One of the cardinal features of our public schools was that all people, belonging to all religions, having all political views, coming from all classes of society, would come together for the educational enterprise. In its essence, education was a search for knowledge, and any view was to be subjected to scrutiny.

That's the ideal. It may not always have turned out that way in practice. But I don't think it is too important for the purposes of this discussion to look at the defects of the American public school system in practice. I think the *ideal* is really clear; it is spelled out over and over again in the American public school literature. The tradition of public education is that in such a noble enterprise as the search for knowledge, truth, enlightenment, everybody can work together.

I do believe very strongly that this is an important feature of our school. Anyone who knows personally some of the people associated with the school knows that the school community spans an extraordinary divergence of political views, and this has not been a barrier to working together. The main point is that nobody need feel uncomfortable in the school, regardless of his or her political views. Everyone has full freedom to express their views and to hear others, and no one is ever made to feel "square" or an outsider because the individual holds views that may be in a minority on the political scene.

As I just said, the public school system is closest to us in this respect. By contrast, alternative schools are virtually all identified with specific political movements. Every alternative school that I know about has stressed the political nature of its program. Sometimes this may not be evident because of their use of language. "Politics" has become a dirty word, and so it has become very modish to hide the fact that what they are doing is political. They prefer to call themselves non-political even when they are doing political things, and as a result it becomes hard to spot the politics in their literature.

I think you will find time and time again that groups will try to hide the political nature of what they are doing by couching their work in moral terms, by referring to grander over-arching aims that don't show the political reality that they really are. That's why when you read the literature of an alternative school you have to read it carefully.

For example, you may find a school catalog that doesn't have a single word about politics in it, but you find that the things they stress are ecology, organic foods, a certain approach to the body, a certain approach to the sexes, towards family life — all of the things that virtually constitute a political program for the organization of a community and a way of life. Their little brochures can be three pages long, but that is long enough for you to find out that their school is being set up by a group with a very focussed political program — even though the word "politics" never appears. And of course the "insiders" know it. It's only the casual readers who are duped. It's like a code. Often they come here on a visitor's day and one of the first things they ask is, "How many people do you get studying ecology?" That's a code word — they're not really interested in our curriculum, but they want to identify quickly whether we are "with it" or not.

Some schools are more overt, and say point blank that they are interested in people having certain specific political views, and that they carefully screen applicants and staff members to make sure they get politically pure people in their community. They say it in so many words. But for the most part, this is pretty well camouflaged in the literature of alternative schools, and you can pick it up only by reading carefully and asking yourself, "Is this literature a code for a certain community structure that these people are advocating or isn't it?" Put our literature to that test, and you will see that it is all clearly politically neutral. You simply cannot put your finger on a program of specific community action in our school writings.

So probably the most blatant difference between our school and most of the alternative schools started by other groups is that the others are virtually all connected to some political movement. You should not take what I am saying to be antagonistic towards other alternative schools. I'm simply trying to point out a difference. I think it is perfectly legitimate for any group to set up its own educational institution if it wants to. I'm not at all opposed to that idea; in fact, I think it is part of our pluralistic scene. I think political schools play the same role in the political sector as parochial schools play in the religious sector. There is nothing wrong with the idea that people who have strong religious convictions should want to set up a school where those convictions dominate. I don't have anything against any group, right, left, or center, saying they would like a politically pure school because they have an ideal they want to nurture in a pure environment. My only concern is to make sure that people understand what they are going into; that people don't think they are getting one thing when they are in fact getting another. We don't want people coming to this school thinking it is a "Movement" school and then be disappointed that we let in all these "right-wing creeps." And I don't want people going to an alternative school thinking they are in an apolitical situation, when in fact they are getting indoctrinated, which I think happens much of the time.

The Existence of Rules of Order

We have always thought it important to have official meetings of any group in the school operate according to some set of explicit, formal procedures. I don't attach any importance to Robert's Rules in particular. It makes no difference if they are Robert's Rules, Congressional Rules, Sudbury Valley Rules or any other set of rules. What is important is that we've always run our meetings according to strict rules of order.

This contrasts to the usual way meetings are held, where somebody runs the meeting; I call that the authoritarian model, and I think that is the most prevalent model. Somebody determines what is going to be discussed, who will talk when, when the discussion will be terminated, and how the decision will be made — if the person doesn't make the decision himself. This is the standard pattern of faculty meetings, religious groups, and so forth. There is somebody with power who does things in the way that person thinks is right. Every now and then someone may complain, and some compromises may be made, but that's the way it runs.

A second model that has become more *avant garde* today, more "with it," more accepted by the "in" groups, is the extreme opposite of the authoritarian model, but similar to it in essence. This model is dominated by the mood of the group rather than the mood of an authority figure. It's a group meeting, a "togetherness" experience. The idea is that everything should be done by consensus: "We will all get together, and as long as there is disagreement, we are going to talk it over, to get a real meeting of minds, until we are all really together." The idea is the same as the authoritarian model in essence, because it's governed by an arbitrariness, except that this is the arbitrariness of the whole group spirit rather than of an individual. There doesn't necessarily have to be continuity from one day to another, or from one hour to another; it is something that is governed by the spirit of the occasion. Generally speaking, ever since the encounter-group mania that swept the country in the mid-sixties, it has become very "in" to think that it's a good thing to have meetings run that way, by group consensus, better than having one authority run it. I don't really know why this has happened. I think I would personally ascribe it to the flight from individual expression and strength and submergence in a group as a substitute. This approach has taken hold all over, even in corporations, where you would never have expected it. They don't make decisions the way they used to; instead, they get people together out in the country for a few days, and give them some sort of tremendous experience, the idea being that a strong bond will be formed that will become the basis for making decisions.

Both the authoritarian types and the group types view the kinds of meetings we have in the Sudbury Valley School with disdain. The idea that decision making should take place according to some formal set of explicit procedures is repugnant to both sides. The reason this is so is related to what we talked about in the last item. The chief function of rules of order is to protect all views and to give them as detached and thorough an airing as possible. Rules constitute the main protection for reason, intellect, objectivity, and detachment in a group context, as opposed to feeling and emotion. This is because rules ritualize the equality of all views and all people. They are set up specifically to equalize any view; they make it possible for anybody to use the meeting, to introduce a motion, to get the floor. They protect a speaker from being shouted down, they prevent an outburst of emotion on the floor, they protect a debate, they prevent a personal argument between two people that will bring out emotional antagonisms rather than reasoned arguments. That's their chief aim. As with every other aim, you don't always succeed in attaining it. There is always a way to violate the spirit of the rules. Nothing on paper ever protects you totally. So some views can be shut out eventually if they get on people's nerves enough. There is no absolute protection. But the trend is unmistakable: to guarantee the rule of reason through rules of order. This is why this item is related to the previous one. In a situation where you are looking for political sameness, there is nothing more repugnant than a minority view; that's just a pain in the neck. Wherever one wants ideological purity, one doesn't want to guarantee equal exposure to all views. But in an apolitical institution like this school, such protection has become important to us.

That's why rules of order have survived repeated onslaughts in the school. No sooner were rules of order announced and they were attacked in the summer of '68, and often again in the fall of '68. People complained bitterly about the formality of the School Meeting. A good deal later there was again a feeling of dissatisfaction about the way the School Meeting was run — dissatisfaction that again focussed on the formality of the rules; and we actually set up a special committee to study the functions of the School Meeting and make recommendations for changes. Anybody who had complaints about the School Meeting could come forward; and there were some changes made in the procedure as a result of this committee's work. But the basic form was preserved, even though there were certain people who felt that we just shouldn't have rules, that people should be able to say whatever they wanted, and we should be able to make major decisions right on the floor. Earlier, in '68 some people said it a little more bluntly — that the meeting should be a "happening." But in fact the school's basic attitude toward rules of order has been reaffirmed over and over again by an overwhelming majority of the School Meeting membership, until by now it is not an issue at all.

In fact, the more people have come to realize the significance of their rules, the more they have taken advantage of them. The *School Meeting Record* will show, for example, that as time has passed a greater diversity of people introduce motions. More people are coming to feel that they have access to the political process. It is the existence of a clear, explicit procedure that protects and encourages them in doing this. You can see it when you talk to students at the school, even the littlest kids: "We want to have a field trip and we have to go to the School Meeting and introduce a motion for it." It's a beautiful equalizer. They don't say, "We have to ask staff member A to arrange it for us." They don't look to an authority, and they don't say, "We have to get everybody in the school community to agree that it is a good thing." They realize that the way the procedures are set up in the school, every citizen of the school community has equal access in presenting whatever the person wants to the source of power, the democratic School Meeting. Anybody who has been at a School Meeting cannot fail to notice that political "power blocks" use this access regularly. A block will show up when something of special interest is on the floor. A group of people troops in for a motion, and troops out later; all ages, not necessarily little or middle or anything, but very well focussed, knowing exactly what they are doing.

I think it is perfectly self-evident how this fits into the American tradition. The establishment of rules was a very conscious effort on the part of the founders of the country when they set up the first legislatures, both in the states and in the federal government. We have records of debates and discussions on the rules of order in Congress, and on the functions that these were to serve — in particular, to protect the rational quality of the discussion.

I think you'll find this concept missing from most other schools. Traditional schools are almost totally run on the authoritarian model. Alternative schools, interestingly enough, are about equally divided. Many are run by a charismatic leading figure. Others are run as a continuing encounter group. I wouldn't be surprised if this single feature alone accounts for the high failure rate of so many alternative schools. They just didn't have good procedures for making decisions. They didn't have the decision-making capability to air all the views and consider all the options necessary to their survival. So when the crunch came, they just gave up the ghost.

The Rule of Law

This resembles the previous item in many respects. By "rule of law" I mean the existence of explicit, published rules governing the community, and the existence of a rational means for arriving at such rules. The previous item was limited to the procedures of the governing body; this item refers to the actual laws governing individuals and the community as a whole. Conceptually, there is much in common between this item and the preceding one.

The rule of law is generally acknowledged to be a cornerstone of orderly, organized society. In our school, laws are always promulgated in writing, and careful records are kept of the body of precedents surrounding each rule. There is a simple process for the adoption of new laws and repeal of old, obsolete laws — a democratic process accessible to all members of the community. There is no opening, however small, for arbitrary or capricious authority to step in.

The public schools remain one of the last bastions of autocratic rule in our society. Power generally resides in the principal, sometimes elsewhere; it is not important to locate where it is, only to note its autocratic nature. There is in fact no rule of law. It is interesting how the public schools have become sensitive to this defect. There is a lot of agitation on the part of various community groups to institute in public schools some of the protections afforded by rule of law. Usually, the schools respond by starting to promulgate sets of rules and regulations, to give the appearance that they're acceding to this demand. This process first started in higher education in the late sixties, and has slowly filtered its way down to the high schools, but rarely lower. What I find so fundamentally dangerous about this trend is that it is basically a fraud, because at no time does the absolute source of power give up its right to change the rules at will. The rules that hold today can be replaced by a new set tomorrow. The community is getting the external impression that there is a clear set of fair rules, whereas in fact the real power remains where it was before. I guess there are always some people who will say that this is a step in the right direction, but I've always felt that in a situation like this the "step in the right direction" is in fact a step in the wrong direction, because it is meant to pull the wool over the eyes of the public and make them think there is real protection, in order to deflect criticism.

What is perhaps more surprising is that, by and large, alternative schools do not believe in the rule of *law either. They too operate in an atmosphere of* arbitrary rules that usually emanate not from a single power figure, like a principal, but from some rule-making body operating without regular rules of order. There is a constant shifting of sands in these alternative schools, depending on the mood of the population each week.

We had tremendous pressure on us when we first opened not to codify our rules, since "next week we could get together and change them," as many people said. These were real issues in the school; there were groups who argued vehemently that we shouldn't have written rules. "We want to be able to modify things as the spirit moves us." The first time we mimeographed a collection of the rules passed by the School Meeting was at the end of August 1968, and that very act of mimeographing was a stand on this issue. It meant that a code of law was being developed, and it also meant that we considered the School Meeting to be a continuing legislative body, so that we didn't have to start all over making new rules each year. The promulgation of the August 1968 code of School Meeting Resolutions meant that the results of the summer of '68 were not going to be for the summer only, but for the future as well, until duly modified.

In many alternative schools, power resides in the momentary whim of the majority at a given instant. This is part of a conscious effort by the majority to make sure that the minority will always shift with the majority. Alternative schools are often open about this; they want to submerge the individuality of each member in the community. This is usually explicit in the literature of these schools — that they hold the unity of the community to be of prime value and to take precedence over everything else. So they will usually undermine any attempt to institute the rule of law, since that would tend to make an individual feel secure and protect that person when he or she chooses to stand apart.

Universal Suffrage

This is the idea that everybody, every citizen has a vote. It is really a simple idea. The American experience has been an inexorable march toward universal suffrage, which hasn't stopped yet. This has been a root trend in American democracy. In the early days, voting used to be subject to all sorts of race and property and age requirements. Slowly, unpropertied males, then blacks, then the females were added, and recently the age has been reduced to eighteen. It's just a matter of time before people start asking why it shouldn't be sixteen or lower. It is clear that there is a constant movement in the direction of universality.

There is a real difference between a democratic society that believes in universal suffrage and one that doesn't. This difference reflects itself in the whole society in all of its functions. For example, Athenian society was a pure democracy for Athenian male freemen, of whom there were several thousand; and it was based on a large substructure of enslaved subjugated peoples and also on a smaller substratum of women, who were not slaves, but were second class citizens. There was nothing unstable about this. It was quite stable, it lasted a long time. The only reason this ever went under, really, was because there were stronger empires around who defeated the Athenians at war; but as far as their internal structure was concerned, it was quite stable. The fact that there wasn't universal suffrage meant that elitism was an inherent part of the Athenian world view, which held that there was a privileged segment of society, and the rest of society was there to serve them. This went to the heart of the Greek world view, as can be seen, for example, in Plato and Aristotle. Even after Greek democracy disappeared, that idea remained part of Western culture right up to modern times. Elitism allows for democracy within the privileged group, but this doesn't do any good for the rest of the citizens. I think this trend of privileged democracy, which is so different from the egalitarianism of universal suffrage, is evident right up to the present day. Communist countries often used the word "democracy" honestly, reflecting a genuine belief that there ought to be democratic procedures within an elite — which in their case was the party, the political elite of the proletariat. What I am saying is simply that they do use the word "democratic" in a sense that has a long history in our culture. The American idea, by contrast, is egalitarian.

Universal suffrage was built into the school from the beginning. We always felt that every single person who is part of the community has to have a say in it one way or another. We changed our views on exactly how much of a say any segment should have, and exactly where this should be expressed. Much depended on how much we felt we could get away with. In the beginning, we didn't think we could get away with the School Meeting making financial decisions, because our legal advisors worried that such an arrangement wouldn't stand up contractually in court. But the trend in school was always clear. Our view was always that everybody in the school, aged four and up, should have an equal access to power. Many years ago, we reached that state.

If we contrast the situation in other schools, we see again that there have been interesting trends at various levels towards extending the suffrage to a certain extent. But if we look closely, we will see the true state of affairs more clearly. Let's focus briefly on higher education, which I think is the best example. There was a tremendous amount of hoopla in higher education, especially back in the sixties, about democratizing the universities. This was part of the agitation on campuses. There was much talk of spreading the decision making power. But when it was all over, who got any real new power? The answer is only the faculty. In no case that I know of did any real power go to the students. Even when students were put on Boards of Trustees, the number allowed to serve was strictly limited. Imagine if we had in our by-laws that there should be 15 trustees, of whom no more than three should be students, no more than three parents, etc., etc., and you'll see the contrast right away. Our Board of Trustees is a board of Assembly members, period; anybody can become a trustee. We can have an entire Board of outsiders, or of staff members, or students, or anything. Whereas in the universities they made it look like they were doing something to distribute the power, but they really were going to keep it where it was all along. I'm not saying there was no concession made. Real concessions were made within the elite, to the faculty. This is just what I'm talking about, that the idea of democracy as it is sold in Academia, in the heart of our educational system, is a Greek one: democracy is for the privileged. Time and time again, if you talk to faculty members, they'll confuse the issues very nicely. They'll say, "There is no equality in real life. I know more about biology than my students. I know more, and I should have more to say about it." And they say this quickly so nobody should see that they're confusing the issue of *subject matter* with the issue of *political power*, which of course are two very different issues. The contrast to our school is instructive.

Protecting the Rights of Individuals

This school has a strong tradition that there exist rights belonging to every individual member of the school community, and that these have to be protected in every way possible. For example, consider the right of privacy. This right is not something you can codify legally, it's not a rule that has been passed; it is just something inherent in the school. It is one of the individual rights we protect in this school. Because of this right we do not have any kind of intervention in the private affairs of students — intervention that characterizes other schools. There isn't anything against it in our by-laws or rules, it's just part of our tradition to shy away from that kind of activity. If we do intervene, there is an enormous burden on the school to justify it, before we can do it.

The idea of protecting the rights of individuals is an essential part of American culture. This is not an absolute concept; it's a much more subtle one, that involves a great deal of judgment. Which rights, how far they go, where the boundary line is drawn between individual and community, these are all things that have to be decided and worried about day in, day out, year in, year out. That's why this idea is on my list of subtleties, because it's not something where you just draw a line and say, "These are absolute rights." Where the line is drawn between community interest and private interest is a matter of constant judgment.

The vast majority of national experiences in the history of man have not recognized the idea of individual rights as paramount in importance.

Wherever the transition from a loose family or tribal units to national units took place, it involved a tremendous shifting of emphasis to the group, an emphasis which had to put an enormous value on the group in order to keep it together. There is nothing "natural" about forming a nation. Perhaps there is something natural about forming small groups, but a nation is a large conglomerate that does not hold together simply by blood ties or by friendship; it is held together by some sort of Idea, and apparently the only way this can happen is through tremendous pressure on the individuals in a nation to give up their individuality and subject themselves to the Idea. So that formation of nations and states required shifting values towards community, and this went far towards downgrading the idea of the individual.

Contrast that with what went on in this country in the late sixties and early seventies, a situation which is inconceivable in any setting other than the American one. It is simply staggering that you can have a country at war, and right through that war people will go on with significant protests that are demoralizing and disruptive — and be protected by the courts and legislatures and even by the government they are attacking. Even in the worst crises, we have hardly ever sacrificed our individual rights. For exceptions, one has to think back to a "horrible autocrat" like Abraham Lincoln . . . who abolished the *habeas corpus* during the Civil War! Even during the Second World War, when a tremendous panic and sense of insecurity swept the country because we were totally unprepared for any sort of military struggle, the internment of the Japanese on the West Coast raised a tremendous uproar of protest. The American attitude towards individual rights has no parallel in history.

Which rights are protected, and how far, all this is subject to debate; but the fact that they exist and are worthy of protection is a sacred principle.

A democratic school that is rooted in the American tradition has to have that feature too. It is not necessary for me to talk about other schools at length, because the rights of people in schools are just simply not respected, even if there is occasional lip service paid to this. In public schools, this is true for teachers and administrators, as well as being true — and well-known — for students. Furthermore, the idea of individual rights is absent from most alternative schools for reasons that I have spelled out several times, because those schools are primarily committed to the community idea.

Five subtleties, all essential to defining the particular character of the Sudbury Valley School, and marking clearly its place in the history of the American Experience.

The Silent Factor

Hanna Greenberg

I would like to write briefly about a subject that is almost never mentioned in Sudbury Valley publications, for what I think are good reasons. In fact, I am not quite sure it is wise to write this little piece!

When the school was in a state of development prior to opening and in the early years, we concentrated much of our thought on what can be best called "children's rights" in a political social sense. Our thinking as reflected in our writings was focussed then on the structure of the school as a democratic institution dedicated to allowing children their full rights, which were daily denied them in all other schools — such as the right to justice and equality under the law, as well as the right to spend their time according to their own wishes. We formulated our own set of rules for behavior, binding on the whole community, children and adults alike. "A person cannot infringe on another's rights." "A person cannot disturb another's activities." "A person cannot use another's private property without permission." "A person cannot endanger the safety of another." And so on in that vein. A judicial system evolved to safeguard these rights and to ensure fairness and justice.

In addition we organized the school to allow maximum freedom from adult interference in the daily lives of the students. As long as children do no harm to others, they can do whatever they want with their time at school. The adults in other schools plan a curriculum of study, teach the students the material and then test and grade their learning. The adults at SVS are the guardians of the children's freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn what they wish. They also are there to answer questions and to impart specific skills or knowledge when asked to by the students.

The structure of Sudbury Valley provides the foundation for a second aspect of the school that we usually don't say much about, but which is nevertheless one of the school's major features: creating and maintaining a nurturing environment in which children feel that they are cared for. From the beginning, we shied away from writing about the warm atmosphere that we created. I believe that we have been reticent about this aspect for many reasons, some of which I would like to go into here.

First and foremost, we operate under the assumption that if we ensure that justice and freedom will prevail, the students will thrive. They will feel safe and secure enough to develop their own character and to chart their own course through life in a healthy and exciting way, no matter what we do as adults, as long as we don't interfere.

Second, Sudbury Valley was set up to be a day school complimenting the child's family but never superseding it in importance. Thus the assumption is that the child receives a full measure of love from within the family, and uses the school to develop a wider range of relationships, from close and intimate to very casual, all of course determined by the children themselves.

Third, we always felt that while you can legislate rights, you can't legislate feelings. If an institution promises a democratic structure and respect for children's rights, one can see rather quickly whether it is delivering the goods. But if it promises tender-loving-care, one can never know what it truly means. So we never talked about anything to do with feelings.

Fourth, schools in our culture are not expected to provide a congenial environment for internal growth. Their primary purpose is to impart skills and knowledge and to prepare the young for a successful career. At Sudbury Valley, we want a place that does not rob children of their time to explore and discover their inner selves. So we have focussed in our writings on the reality of the existing schools, and talked about rights and freedom to do what you want with your time, and we did not talk about more elusive emotional matters which nonetheless occupied a major part of our day-to-day time and energy.

The ever-changing realm of personal growth is too intangible and ephemeral to grasp with scientific precision. Like the beauty of nature, it is evanescent and transitory. Artists endeavor to capture the moment and immortalize it, but art at its pinnacle is a poor approximation of what nature can do. Because we can't quantify an experience we often seem to underestimate its importance. In our industrial-technological era, we measure everything and reduce all complexities to computerized data sheets. But life as it flows will not be measured without losing its meaning. The same is true with the children at our school who don't come to take classes, but who come to live their lives, to explore nature, themselves and our culture. They experiment, observe, analyze and dream. They grow, mature and get themselves ready for adulthood. But the how and what and why is each person's private affair and we do not impinge on it in order to evaluate it. So we cannot really explore or analyze or lay out for all to see what I think is the most important aspect of our school. We cannot even begin to describe the way we nurture the growth; support the kids when they feel lost or floundering; reassure them and teach them that we believe in them and that they can do anything they want to if they work hard at achieving their goals.

Sudbury Valley is a complex community. Its objectives and structure are clearly delineated and articulated. But what makes it all work is intangible and mysterious. It is made up of many small actions, that together form a living and ever-changing educational institution. It is a place where the students can learn how to be themselves — with self-knowledge, with confidence, and with joy, strengthened by the knowledge that the adults around them are committed to nurturing their growth.

Teaching Justice through Experience

Daniel Greenberg

One of the most difficult ideas to convey to children is that of justice, as reflected in the social order. The concept itself is complex and multi-leveled. It has to do with the development of fair rules of behavior for human interaction; with the interpretation of these rules in the context of daily life; with the acculturation of new members of the community to these rules; and with the fair monitoring and enforcement of these rules. Each of these aspects involves a great deal of human wisdom and judgment, much of which comes only through accumulated experience.

At first blush, the task of teaching justice to a new generation of youngsters seems forbidding. And indeed, viewed as an exercise in teaching moral philosophy, the task is virtually unattainable, as every moral preacher in history has found out. You can't just talk at people about good and evil, right and wrong, and hope to affect their actions. The reason is simple: if the hearers are young and inexperienced, such talk is boring and relates to nothing they can lay their hands on. If the hearers are older, they are usually set in their ways and unaffected by mere talk.

The challenge is this: how do you teach a socially acceptable concept of justice to children in a way that will acculturate them, interest them, involve them, and affect their future behavior? The answer lies in two words: *through experience*. Let's take a closer look at how this is done.

Consider the first aspect of justice, the development of rules governing human interactions in the community. In our society, we expect these rules to emanate from the community, in what we call a "democratic process" of legislation. Western democracies are based, among other things, on the belief that regulations made with the participation of all affected members of the society have a better chance of being valid, and of *being considered* valid by the affected parties.

The chief non-family social setting of children in developed societies is the school. What better place to begin to give children the experience of democratic rule making, with all the trappings? Where better to learn the art of debate, the need for taking other people's views into account, the benefits of open mindedness, the balancing forces of personal and community interests, the nature of political power-blocs, the joy of victory and the anguish of defeat, the ability to recoup a loss and plan for future gain?

It would seem almost essential to begin teaching children in the real context of their early social setting, the school. Yet, this is almost never done. Small wonder that we hear on all sides a litany of complaints about adolescent lawlessness and indifference to community welfare.

Consider another aspect of justice, law enforcement. In our type of society, we hold law enforcement to be a product of the democratic order, engaged in by public servants chosen directly or indirectly by the people and accountable to the people. We hold trials before our peers, and accept judgment from our equals. Again, the idea is that the fairest and most acceptable form of enforcement in a free democratic society is one that involves the whole community on an equal footing.

Here, too, the place children have for developing their sense of justice is the school, where they spend a dozen or more of their formative years sheltered from the outside world, held tightly in their own child centered world. What could be more important to their future behavior in adult society than to develop, through experience, an understanding of the subtleties of law enforcement? How enriching it is to deal directly with the evaluation of evidence, the consideration of extenuating circumstances, and the careful balancing of such ideas as prevention, deterrence, vengeance and rehabilitation.

Our school has, for nineteen years, laid great emphasis on the development of a sense of justice in children through direct experience. From the beginning, we have operated along lines that parallel the realities of adult experience in the surrounding community. All rules, without exception, are created by a legislative body called the School Meeting, modeled on the New England Town Meeting, at which every student and every teacher has one (and only one) vote. No hidden powers of any kind whatsoever are reserved to some higher authority. The School Meeting reigns supreme and students age four to nineteen experience at all times the full challenge of creating and maintaining the real social order that is this school. This is no showpiece Student Assembly, or Mock Parliament. This is the real thing, where real rules govern real behavior in the real life of the school.

Similarly, all law enforcement takes place through a judicial system established by the School Meeting in which everyone participates. Students are responsible for investigating infractions, for trying alleged rule-violators, and for deciding what to do with guilty parties.

The results of this remarkable system of justice are fascinating to observe. To begin with, the school is noticeably well-ordered, much to the surprise of many outsiders, who wonder at the deep sense of internal harmony present in a school where there is so much personal freedom in daily activities. There is virtually no vandalism, and little overtly destructive activity. School Meetings take place weekly, Judicial Committee meetings about three times a week. Rules are proposed, debated, voted on, revised and refined by the School Meeting, and enforced and interpreted by the Judicial Committee. All are published in a School Meeting Law Book given to everyone.

The judicial process is smooth. The Committee deliberations are as intricate as the cases before them; some brief, others lasting days.

The result is a student body that learns about justice through active participation in its definition and administration. Graduates go out into the world ready to take their place at once as responsible members of the community at large.

SVS Glimpses

Hanna Greenberg

It is the start of a new year at SVS. My days are full with talking to students, catching up with the old-timers and getting to know the new ones. One afternoon, in the middle of such a talk, little Jim — who is six — came over to me obviously upset. Of course I dropped everything and gave him my full attention.

Jim's problem was that Max, who is also six, had threatened to "bring him up" (i.e., write a complaint against him to the Judicial Committee, the "JC") and Jim was both scared and incensed. I asked him to tell me what happened but I confess that I couldn't make any sense of what he said. So I decided to investigate and told him to come outside with me.

On our way out Suzie (six as well) was comforting Jim by telling him that being brought up was not that bad. He asked her if she was scared the first time and if she cried. She smiled her warm smile and assured him that she, and everybody, cried the first time they had to deal with the JC, but that then you get used to it and it's not that bad.

We found Max sitting and sulking on the stone bench under the Beech tree. Suzie sat herself close by his side to give him comfort with her presence. (No, I am not reading meanings into her actions! I have seen her do just that on numerous occasions since she was four years old). I sat on Max's other side and I asked him to tell me what happened. He too was agitated and in a loud and scolding voice he shouted at poor Jim to go away so he could talk to me alone.

I could see Suzie's quandary. She wanted to help both of her friends and she didn't know what to do. So I asked Max if Suzie could stay and he, being a fair person, realized that since he had shooed Jim away Suzie should leave as well. This allowed Suzie to go to Jim and support him!

Max told me his story.

He, Jim and Suzie decided to go to the "rocks" and play there. Then Jim suggested that they jump from rock to rock and Max did and fell and hurt himself. He felt that it was Jim's fault since it was Jim's idea to play that particular game, and Max felt compelled to play even though he didn't want to.

I asked him why he played if he didn't want to.

"Because if I didn't they would think that I am a chicken," he answered, "and now I hurt myself and it's his fault and I am bringing him up!!!"

Max was near tears by now, but I continued to pursue the matter.

"Why did you do it if you didn't want to?" I asked again.

Max was getting exasperated with me.

"I told you that I don't want them to think that I am chicken!" he yelled at me and then he added: "I came to SVS to get peace and quiet and what do I get?" He stopped short, looking for the right word.

"Trouble?" I asked, and Max repeated with much emphasis: "Yes, I came here to get peace and quiet and what do I get? Trouble!"

It was clear to me that Jim had said nothing about Max being a chicken and was simply playing a game. Jim was truly innocent of even hurting Max's feelings. It was Max who felt that if he didn't jump that he would be a chicken, but when he fell and hurt himself he blamed Jim for it.

I was groping for a way to explain it to Max, looking for the right words when Arthur, aged 13, who had overheard the entire conversation, called to Max from a low branch of the beech tree.

"Max you don't have to do what you don't want to do here, especially if you think that you will get hurt. Here you have to think for yourself and not do what others think you should do."

Max left me then and climbed up the tree to talk with Arthur more. They talked about courage to try new things and about why people tease you sometimes. Arthur said that sometimes when people say teasing things to you it is really a compliment because they think that you are strong or wise.

"What is a compliment?" asked Max and Arthur told him.

While they were talking Suzie came back on the scene, and climbed into the tree and stood beside them. Then she swung on a branch and jumped from it to the ground — about six feet! She had done it before and she made it look easy. So poor Max was challenged again! He too started swinging from the branch, looking very terrified, even as Arthur and I were telling him not to jump if he wasn't ready.

Max couldn't bring himself to jump and so he carefully walked back to the crotch of the tree and jumped down from there, a much shorter distance. I heaved a sigh of relief, thinking that he had learned his lesson and refrained from doing what he couldn't do just because others could — but I was wrong!! In a flash Max was back up on the branch swinging away and down he jumped. I clapped for him but he just ignored me.

I left the scene full of excitement. I felt lucky and privileged to have had a glimpse of how the little kids at our school support each other and help each other grow — to overcome their fears, to become independent and use their own judgement — and how the older kids take pains to help them do it.

On Law and Order

Daniel Greenberg

The judicial system at Sudbury Valley is one of the keystones of the school's structure, and has long been our pride and joy. We have always felt, based on the values of the American experience, that due process of law is an essential element in a school embodying the principles of personal liberty, mutual respect, and political democracy. Early in the first year of the school's existence, the School Meeting devoted long hours to establishing the legal principles and juridical structure of the school, with results that quickly produced a stable social order and a prevailing feeling among students, staff, and parents that here everyone got a fair shake when brought before the bar of justice.

The system which was created in 1968-69 continued unchanged for over a decade. It was designed, as was so much else in the school, with an eye toward the future, when we hoped to have a student body of many hundreds (perhaps thousands). As the years passed, and it became clear that our growth would be somewhat more gradual, those aspects of the school that were more particularly suited to large communities were revised one by one, to accommodate reality. Among the systems that came under review and were modified by the School Meeting was the judicial system. The School Meeting felt that the original system was too cumbersome for a school community numbering no more than one hundred souls. The most serious problem with the old system (though not the only problem) was the length of time it took for a judicial matter to be settled. Barring some major crisis (of which there were a mere handful over the years), the shortest time required to resolve a judicial matter was three weeks, and the average time was more like four or five weeks. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the original incident had long been forgotten by all concerned. There seemed to be no way of shortening the time in the framework of the old system, or of resolving other problems with it. A new judicial system was carefully fashioned with the intention of eliminating the existing problems while preserving the good features that we wished to keep.

The judicial reform of 1979, which was centered around the creation of the Judicial Committee ("JC"), was greeted with enthusiasm by virtually all School Meeting members. For five years, it maintained the tradition of justice and fairness for which we have been widely known and praised. Many people labored hard, and with pride, to serve in the system in various capacities.

In 1984 the system was further refined. We have lived with the system long enough to understand it well; we can appreciate its strengths and spot its weaknesses. The system is working well. I would like to take an analytical look at what we have.

Before proceeding to the particular, some discussion is in order about the general.

There are five distinct stages to the judicial process. These are, in serial order:

(1) Allegation. A person is alleged by someone to have committed a misdeed. In the world at large, this allegation can be brought by private individuals (by which I include groups, partnerships, corporations, committees, or other privately organized entities) or by governmental agents.

(2) Investigation. If the allegation is considered to merit further action, an investigation is made of the circumstances surrounding the allegation. In the outside world, the investigation can be carried out by the police, by members of the justice division of the government, or by private individuals.

(3) Charge. If the investigation is deemed to have yielded sufficient cause for further action, a charge is made that a specific law has been violated, and the alleged violator is brought to trial. The laws concerned may or may not be written (statutes vs. common law) and the alleged wrongdoings may lead to criminal trials or civil suits. In the outside community, the charges can be brought by individuals or by government officials, in the latter case usually by agents of one or another department of justice.

(4) Trial. Once a charge is made, the case comes to trial. The trial must follow prescribed rules of procedure that are known and considered fair. In the community at large, the trial can be held before a judge, with or without a jury, or before an arbitration panel, with or without right of appeal, depending on circumstances; usually, however, there is some mechanism for appealing a decision against a defendant. The trial delivers as its culmination a verdict or decision. In our system, there is no double jeopardy, which means that a person found innocent of

a particular charge of wrongdoing may not again be brought to trial on the same charge.

(5) Sentence. If a person is found through the trial process to have done wrong, that person is sentenced (by which I include, for purposes of this discussion, civil decisions assessing damages, penalties, etc.). In the world at large, sentencing is usually carried out by a judge, most often the trial judge, but occasionally by the jury in certain types of jury trial. There is always an opportunity to appeal a sentence on certain specified grounds.

The entire five stage process outlined ever so briefly above constitutes the generally accepted juridical system in most societies. Where societies differ radically from one another is in the way these steps are carried out — the "rules of the game." In this country, we have laid great stress on having the whole process take place according to "due process of the law," a phrase which over the years has come to be laden with meaning for all Americans. Generally speaking, "due process" assures each and every one of us that we are to be given a fair shake at every one of the five stages of the juridical process. "Fair shake" is not, of course, any more specific or enlightening than "due process" in and of itself, but a great deal of legal history has given rich content to these words, and most citizens of this country, from all walks of life, have a rather good idea of what they mean.

Let's put it this way. We do not expect to be subject to frivolous or trumped-up allegations. We expect investigations to be thorough and complete, not whitewashed and not such as fabricate "facts" or suppress truths. We expect charges to be specific, relevant, and not *ex post facto*. We expect trials to be open, fair, not biased, and such as give full rights and opportunities to the accused to be adequately defended. And we expect sentences to be fair, and to reflect in a balanced manner society's need for rehabilitation, retribution, and prevention. Any society that does not fulfill these expectations in its legal system is considered by us to be severely, fundamentally, flawed.

The original juridical system instituted in Sudbury Valley by the School Meeting in 1968-69 dealt with each of the five stages in a methodical way.

Allegations of wrongdoing by a member of the community could only be made by individuals (or groups, committees, or school corporations). There has never been a School Meeting official who was given the duty to bring allegations on behalf of the school or any of its organs. The allegations were made either in writing, or orally, for presentation to the Committee on School Affairs ("CSA"). (Making an allegation against someone came to be called "bringing a person up." The origins of this phrase are shrouded in mystery and myth. None of us really remembers whence it came, but the phrase has stuck to this day.)

The CSA was composed of persons picked by lot from among the school population, distributed evenly across all age groups. Service was required, meetings were held frequently, and the term of service was for a period of one month. Each newly chosen CSA elected a chairman to keep things organized and moving. The CSA heard the allegations, and decided whether they merited investigation. If so, the CSA investigated as it saw fit, calling witnesses, and having what amounted to a subpoena power to require witnesses to appear and testify. (If someone refused to testify, the matter would be brought to the School Meeting. No one, of course, was required to testify against themselves.) When the

CSA completed its investigation, it filed with the School Meeting (for publication in the weekly School Meeting Record) its report of the facts of the incident, as revealed by its investigation. The CSA made no determination or charge relative to the breaking of any rules. Its report was viewed solely and entirely as an objective factual account of the events that transpired around the allegation.

The School Meeting at its weekly session received the CSA report. At that time, any School Meeting member could, on the basis of the report, press charges against an alleged violator. The member pressing charges then became the prosecutor at the subsequent trial (together with such helpers as that person chose to enlist). There was no official school prosecutor, nor was the prosecutor necessarily the person who made the original allegation before the CSA. The charge had to refer clearly to a specific rule that the prosecutor held to have been violated. At this juncture, the School Meeting as a whole acted as a kind of grand jury, voting either to permit or not to permit the prosecutor to proceed to trial; the School Meeting voted on the basis of the CSA report — that is, on the basis of the members' perception that the CSA report gave sufficient grounds to warrant a trial. That, and no more.

At this point, the Law Clerk entered the picture. The Law Clerk was a School Meeting official elected to serve half a year, whose function it was (much like the Clerk of the Court in the outside world) to keep clean, complete, and accurate records of all court proceedings. The Clerk made sure the trial was assigned a trial number; notified the defendant of the charge and of the trial; and recorded the defendant's plea. If the plea was "guilty," the trial was automatically adjourned and the process moved on to sentencing. If the plea was "not guilty," the trial was set for a specific day in the week following the School Meeting's vote to allow a trial.

The trial procedure was formal and fixed, spelled out in detail in the School Meeting Law Book. The School Meeting Chairman presided, and the defendant could either represent him/herself or have someone help with the defense. The jury, six in number, consisted of disinterested volunteers (or, if necessary, dragooned "volunteers"); anyone with an interest in the outcome or prior knowledge of the circumstances could not serve as a juror. The trial was open to any School Meeting members who wished to attend. The proceedings and verdict were recorded by the Law Clerk.

If a guilty verdict was rendered, the School Meeting proceeded to sentence the defendant. This was done by the presentation of one or more sentence motions on the floor of the School Meeting, each motion generally requiring two readings before passage. Anyone could present a sentence motion, but the actual sentence had to be decided by the School Meeting as a whole.

The judicial system just described was universally acknowledged to be fair, to protect all the rights of the accused while serving fully the interests of order in the school. It was, however, cumbersome, and took several weeks from the first allegation, through CSA investigation and report, through School Meeting motion for a trial, through trial, and then through two readings of a sentence.

But the real problem lay in the simple fact that the school was, and always has been, small. Everyone knows everyone, people respect each other, and everyone knows that they will be treated fairly. This had an interesting effect on the judicial process. As the years passed, and confidence in the system and the school grew, the number of cases that went to trial diminished and then went to *zero*, and remained at zero year after year. Plainly put, people did not press charges unless the case was clear; and those charged, knowing this, and accepting the fact that they would be dealt with justly, always admitted their guilt and "took their medicine." The system worked so well that for the most part it didn't have to work at all.

From a practical vantage point, the *investigation* served as the trial, because it was fair, and the accused did not feel a need to go beyond it.

This central development is what led ultimately to the thoroughgoing reform that brought about the present juridical process. If the *de facto* situation was that the CSA, as investigator, was in effect trying the case and determining guilt and innocence, why not admit this *de jure*? And if the school community had such faith in the CSA's fairness, why not let the entire process take place there, from beginning to end?

In this way, the Judicial Committee was born, replacing the old CSA in form and in changed function. To take care of the new system, Judicial Clerkships were created, replacing the Law Clerk, and possessing new duties and responsibilities appropriate to the role of the JC.

Let us look closely at how the original JC worked, from 1979 on. The committee itself was made up of members picked by lot from the various student age groups, to serve for two months; and a staff member available to serve at the time the Committee meets. The Committee was chaired by the two Judicial Clerks, who served slightly more than two months (four terms to a school year). In addition to chairing the meetings, they were responsible for record-keeping and, in general, for the smooth operation of the judicial process at school.

The actual steps of the judicial process, previously described, were all handled by the JC. As before, all allegations of misdeeds were brought to the JC by individuals, in writing. (There were no longer provision for oral presentation of complaints.) The JC decided whether an investigation was warranted, and, if so, proceeded. The first step was almost always — except where physically impossible — asking the accused to plead to the charge. If the plea was "guilty," the investigation was over, with the account of the accuser being accepted by the accused, and the guilt being admitted. If the plea was "not guilty" — as it not infrequently was — the investigation proceeded, supposedly in the form of a mini-trial, until the JC finally felt ready to render a verdict. The defendant had the right, if found guilty, to appeal to the School Meeting and ask for a full formal trial, in the old format. (This right was never exercised.)

A guilty plea or verdict led to sentencing, which took place immediately and was decided by the JC. Sentences that were considered by the defendant to be too harsh or unfair could be appealed to the full School Meeting. Several such appeals were made, some of which led to a modification, not always in the direction the defendant had in mind, by the School Meeting of the sentence imposed by the JC.

The entire process, from complaint through sentence (if guilty), could take as little as a few hours. Rarely did it take more than a few days. There was full opportunity for the accused to appeal both the trial and the sentence; this avenue of appeal was considered by the School Meeting to be a safety valve that ensured fairness and due process in the system as a whole, even though several generally accepted aspects of due process were missing from the abbreviated JC procedure. The system worked smoothly, the various JC clerks were extremely careful, hardworking, and fair-minded, and the general feeling at school was that people continued to be, as they always had been, treated with an exceptional degree of fairness and justice.

Still, there was a problem, one that was subtle but slowly revealed itself in greater clarity as the years went by. When the CSA system was in force, fairness wasn't the only currency held dear. The *forms* of justice and due process were also carefully preserved. As students entered the school and became acclimatized to its environment, they developed a profound understanding of the American legal system and the great constitutional, statutory, and customary rights and safeguards that went into the meaning of due process in our culture. This general awareness was a constant feature of the school, year in, year out.

With the substitution of the JC system, fairness and justice remained, but due process in its ramifications slowly faded from view, until only a few people at school had a clear notion of what it meant, or even thought that it had much to do with the school. Thus, one of the greatest gifts we bestowed on our students, an appreciation of their legal rights and duties in our society, was no longer among the legacies we gave them.

Indeed, as time went by, there were a few disturbing signs here and there that the full trappings of due process might not be excess baggage even at Sudbury

Valley. Minor irregularities in JC procedures — none of which led to known miscarriages of justice — gave several people pause to wonder whether we might not have "thrown out the baby with the bath water," and perhaps opened the door to possible abuses, albeit inadvertent, in the future.

As a result, a number of refinements were introduced in 1985, designed to restore some of the benefits that had fallen by the wayside. Let's take a close look, step by step, at how the Judicial System now works.

The school appears by now to have a well established tradition that all allegations of misdeeds be made by individuals, without the need for any school officials to supplement this course. This is as it has been from the beginning, and as long as there is a full complement of socially responsible people at school — which, in effect, is as long as the school will continue to function according to its basic principles — there does not seem to be a reason to modify this approach. For the sake of a clear record, all complaints are written, and there are plenty of people around who are glad to help the illiterate put into writing their oral complaints, by serving as scribes and assistants.

The next step is the crucial one. At the time the complaint is presented, no one knows whether it is serious or frivolous, whether it does or does not involve a breach of the rules, whether the alleged accused was or was not involved and, if so, whether alone or with others. These uncertainties are the reason an investigation is needed, and the JC — as did its predecessor, the CSA — carries out such an investigation (as its mandate expressly requires). But the important point is that at this stage what we want is a report on the facts; there is yet no concrete charge, no trial, *no plea*.

Only when the JC has completed its investigation (and only if it has succeeded in finding out something of substance) is a charge entertained, *by the JC* itself. It is in the best possible position to zero in on the exact violation that appears to have been committed, and on the exact parties involved. In a very real sense, the JC is properly the school's grand jury, collecting all the evidence, and then preparing charges for trial where there is sufficient reason to proceed. And the very constitution of the JC, being a cross section of the school, assures everyone of fair treatment by their peers.

Once a charge has been made by the JC against someone, the wheels of due process can turn, and nothing is to stop them from turning smoothly and promptly. The JC clerk notifies the person charged, and a plea is entered. If "guilty," a trial is not needed, and sentence can be imposed.

If the plea is "not guilty," a trial must be held, the way they were held in the past. The trial is scheduled by the presiding officer, the School Meeting Chairman, within a day or two of the time when the defendant was notified and pleaded "not guilty;" six disinterested School Meeting members serve as jurors; the JC, as bringer of the charge, arranges for a prosecutor; the accused can defend himself or enlist assistance in the defense; and the trial is open to all School Meeting members, as it should be.

Sentencing is in the hands of the JC. In most cases, the investigation, charge, guilty plea and sentence take place in one continuous sequence, since the overwhelming number of infractions are of a nature where this can take place with no violence to justice.

In the few complex cases, a little more time is needed; but the JC's involvement from beginning to end gives it a unique vantage point from which to come up with a fair sentence, and again its constitution as a cross-section of peers is a critical reassurance of fairness to all who come before it.

When all is said and done, the above analysis reaffirms the essential soundness of the existing juridical process. By clearly separating investigation, charge, and trial, we make everyone aware of the need for clearly drawn charges, based on clearly promulgated rules; for full notification of each defendant as to precisely what they are accused of doing; for an impartial trial; for an opportunity to prepare the best defense available. In this way, due process is joined to fairness in the uniquely constituted judicial system of the school.

"When You Were Young..."; A True Story

Daniel Greenberg

"Will you help us write a complaint?"

I was startled from a mid-day reverie as I sat on the couch outside the office. Standing over me, peering at me somewhat hesitantly, were Adrian (age 9) and Naomi (7). "Maybe we should find Marge."

I looked at them for a moment. "What for?" I asked. "Keith (13) and Patrick (8) were disrupting our activities in the quiet room," came the answer. Idly wondering whether I, in turn, should file a complaint against them for their activities in the quiet room, I answered, "Sure," and we marched into the empty office.

It was 1:30. Virtually all the staff was closeted in the newly refurbished stereo room, where they had been meeting with interested students since 11:00 to decide the future use of the room. My task at hand seemed trivial in comparison. Nevertheless, I sat at the office desk, pen in hand, looking as official as I could. Adrian stood close by my right, Naomi leaned over the edge of the desk to my left, both watching every move I made, every word I wrote. This was to be a serious enterprise.

Complaint form before me, I turned to Adrian and said, "Start at the beginning. The very beginning."

"I probably shouldn't have called them names," said Adrian, a bit worried. "That was probably wrong."

"Start from the beginning. What happened?"

"Adam (8) and I were playing in the barn alone. Keith and Patrick came in and started teasing Jeremy (12)."

"Jeremy was there too?" I asked.

"He came in. Then they came. I called them names to protect Jeremy. I did it to help him."

Wondering why Jeremy needed Adrian's protection, I asked him to go on with the story.

"Then they chased us. Keith took my hat, and we ran out of the barn. Joshua (7), Adam and I escaped."

"Joshua was there too?" I asked, rewriting the story yet another time.

"Jeremy, Patrick and Keith chased us. I got away, grabbed my hat, then Keith picked me up, dragged me back to the barn, but we escaped —."

"Just a minute," I interrupted, sensing that I was losing any semblance of understanding of what had taken place. "Why was Jeremy chasing you too, if you were protecting him?"

"I don't know," answered Adrian with a smile. By now the words were spilling out in an excited recitation. His eyes were glistening. There was no stopping him.

"Then we tried to run to the main building and they trapped Adam in the sports closet and Joshua ran and told me and I went to rescue Adam. I made believe I was helping them lock him in but I didn't really and he escaped and I was in but I got out — ."

At this moment a happy and calm Adam walked into the office and stood by Naomi. He certainly didn't look to me like someone who had just endured a harrowing experience.

Adrian was really into it. I turned to him and asked, "Did you have a good time?" He laughed heartily. "Yes," he said. "How about you?" I asked Adam. "Yes. I don't want to write a complaint."

"But they disrupted our activity," Adrian protested.

"What activity?" I asked.

"The magic show."

I hadn't heard of any magic shows that day. Knowing I was letting myself in for it, I said innocently, "What magic show?"

"Naomi and Mindy's (7)," answered Adrian.

A cheerful Joshua had joined us by now. Naomi, who had been silently watchful throughout, perked up at the mention of her name. "We tried to kick them out of the room, but they wouldn't go," she said with excitement, "then we pushed them." "And I tried to get them to go," chimed in Adrian. Joshua was smiling. Adam was somber.

"Can I tear up the complaint?" Adam said.

Naomi grinned. Joshua smiled. I asked Adrian, "What would happen if the complaint remained?"

"They would stop doing it," he answered with a great show of confidence in the effectiveness of the school's judicial system.

"Do you want them to stop?" I asked.

"No," he answered with a hearty laugh.

Adam tore up the complaint. General satisfaction. Then Adrian turned to me as he was preparing to leave and, with a broad smile, asked me, "When you were young, did you have such adventures?"

To Thyself Be True

Hanna Greenberg

We were talking about birthdays, Audrey, Ben, Christine and I. All three children had just turned six and their birthday parties were recalled with much joy.

As a normally foolish adult I asked the kind of questions that kids consider real dumb. Either the answer seems too obvious or the question has a meaning which the children don't quite fathom. At any rate they indulge me patiently and I persist because it helps me to understand how they feel and think. This particular conversation proved to be a winner.

I asked, "Do you feel different now that you are six?"

Christine answered vehemently: "No I don't!! Why should I? I am always myself, what difference does your age make?"

"How true!" I thought to myself feeling both stupid and chastised.

However, later in the day as I was reflecting about the meaning of what Christine had said to me while her friends heartily agreed with her, I realized that I wasn't that stupid after all. My question was all too appropriate for many of the older students at SVS as well as to most of the adults that I know. For, in truth, so many of us lose our own sense of self as the years go by and as the process of socialization grinds on. The better we learn to fit ourselves into the mold, follow our teachers and do what is expected of us — the further we stray from our true selves.

People of all ages over about ten suffer from bouts of identity crisis. They can be highly successful professionals facing retirement, newly unemployed steel workers, college graduates who don't know what to do now that they have to enter life in the real world, or teenagers who are trying to figure out what to do when they grow up. It seems that as life flows on and changes face us these kinds of cross-roads await all of us. It is those among us who know themselves that weather these crises and actually use them as times to deepen their self-understanding and improve themselves. But those who have been deflected from themselves find these times painful and unproductive. They aren't emotionally equipped for making changes because they aren't at home in their own selves. They don't really believe anymore that they have a great measure of control in conducting their lives. They accepted what society wanted them to accept. Perhaps this worked for them for a long while but when social conditions change suddenly they feel lost. They feel cheated by the society which promised security and stability in exchange for doing what was expected of them. They bartered inner harmony for external success and they feel gypped.

Our schools are the foremost instrument in this process of molding the young. It was a useful and possibly a justified goal when society knew what particular skills its economy required. Then it worked for a large number of the population over the span of their lives. Now, times have changed. We no longer can foresee what the future holds for us. We don't know what skills will be valued above others. When I was doing research in biochemistry thirty years ago, I used a slide-rule for my calculations. It was a slow inaccurate process. Now, everyone has a ten dollar pocket calculator and the need for arithmetic computation is obsolete. Oh, how many hours and hours did we waste on them! Same with handwriting and spelling. The word processors have eliminated that chore too.

What our schools need to teach children nowadays is to be flexible in their thinking, to be confident in their ability to make decisions and above all to feel responsible for their own lives as well as for their own communities. These teachings can only be imparted to people who know who they are, to those who are themselves.

I believe that this happens at our school. It happens inside each child in their own mysterious private way. We, the adults, don't do it — we allow it to be done. Still we get thanked by many of our students for giving them back what they had when they were six and subsequently lost. Many tell me that this is what being a student at SVS meant to them. Those students who came to us before attending other schools aren't aware of this process, they just live through it. But those who came to us as older children often tell me a variant of the words Jennifer used when she was sixteen:

"When I was six I knew who I was. Then I went to school and I forgot. Now after three years at SVS I found myself again and I know who I am."

A School for Today

Mimsy Sadofsky

In 1968, the group of people who started Sudbury Valley started by examining the values common in American society in order to determine what values should guide our schools. Our society, which is extraordinarily heterogeneous, also has many overarching common principles, common to people in all parts of the political spectrum. Disagreement may surface about what our ideals mean in practice, but very little disagreement comes up about the ideals.

I would like to talk about some of these values briefly. One of the most obvious is tremendous respect for and belief in self-government as a principle. In New England, we see it in the governments of many of our towns: they are governed directly by their inhabitants through a Town Meeting, which makes all the administrative decisions and delegates all the responsibilities for town functions. In our states and in our country, we choose a representative form of government, and every person does not have immediate say over every decision — but every person has as much say as they wish over who the people are who *represent* us in making the decisions. Many of us belong to social or civic organizations of various kinds. Most are governed the same way — democratically. It is not an accident. We jealously protect our right and ability to make our own decisions. And this right and ability, which we tend to take somewhat for granted in this country, is not an automatic outcome of being born human. Watch the struggles in Eastern Europe to understand responsibility and individual power, to learn how to be free, and it is clear that we didn't become self-governing haphazardly. It took an enormous struggle and the liberties we value still take constant vigilance.

In the United States, we believe that every one must have an equal opportunity to prove themselves. It is of course clear to everyone of us that equal opportunity does not make equal outcome — it merely gives everyone the same sort of chance to reach their own potential. We know that equal opportunity has not been perfectly achieved yet, but it guides our ideals, whether we feel the government should further it or the individual must reach out and grab it on his or her own. Because we feel so strongly about equal opportunity, we also have an extraordinarily highly *mobile* society. Rags to riches, or riches to rags; both are common stories.

And we do not expect everyone to be alike. In fact, quite the opposite. We expect tremendous diversity in our population, and I think more than any other society, we revel in it. We give cultures within our culture tremendous space so that they can assimilate, they can become American, and they can still retain ethnicity.

To us it is self-evident that every member of the community will be a contributing member of the community. Each person will pull their own weight, and each person is expected to contribute to the common good — through good works, through taxes, through political action — in a myriad of structured and unstructured ways.

We hold the rights in our Bill of Rights to be very close to sacred. Freedom to assemble, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of dissent, privacy, even the right to bear arms. These are not universal values. But they are universal American values.

And we feel that these rights extend to the right to equality under the law: Every one is entitled to their day in court. Often it makes us groan with the burden of supporting the courts, but very few of us would want a system that was more efficient if it compromised due process; we all pretty much agree that it is much better to occasionally *not* punish the guilty than it is to infringe on the rights of the accused.

And of course, this is a country where *creativity is prized.* That value has spurred invention and innovation in every walk of life, from the time of the earliest settlements, to the remarkable leap of creativity that lead to the conception of the American government in the eighteenth century, and to our development into the most important power in the world. And it is one of the reasons that our society is the envy of most of the world.

This is the culture into which the Sudbury Valley School was born. The fundamental question facing its founders was: how should children be best educated to be citizens of this society? What kind of school can produce citizens who are most likely to hold to and raise to a high level, the values that the society has? Sudbury Valley was a school meant to embody these fundamental American ideals in a way that no other school ever has. It is today an institution that has carefully examined what it means to respect the individual, and to have faith in the individual's power to exercise responsibility.

How, we asked, can a school best foster creativity? The answer was amazingly simple — and amazingly complex. People are learners. They are born already working on their education! They are born curious — and striving. How else can you explain the unbelievable development in the first few years of life from a pretty much helpless infant, with only the most fundamental communication skill, into a walking, talking toddler whose universe expands exponentially from month to month. They are born creative. No one at all has to explain learning processes to an infant. You can't stop them, and each one learns differently: how to roll over, or to sit up, how to explore with their fingers, to stand, to walk, to say a few words and then a few sentences, and then express an infinite number of thoughts, many complex and abstract. The infant begins life learning in the ways we all use when we are learning for our own pleasure. They explore. They imitate. They experience. They build more complex world views from trial and error. It is simple to understand, but terribly difficult to accept, *that the individual is best served at every age by allowing that native curiosity and creativity to be undeflected and uninterrupted.* That the *best* schooling may be the schooling that *least impedes* the mind's free exploration of the environment. I want to read the description one of our graduates has of both why learning is naturally bound to take place, and how an individual's models of the world are expanded.

Learning and playing. I'm sure many other people have thought about the process of a kid's adaptation to his environment. I think it's important to have fun when you're a kid in whatever you do. It's part of the growing process. I suspect that kids when they play are trying out constructs, mental constructs, that they see other people using. They're not really in a position in the real world to use those constructs, so they play and imitate them and figure them out. If it wasn't fun, they probably wouldn't do it. The motivation for figuring out all this stuff around you is that it feels good to do it.

We have to understand the world around us because certain information that we need to survive cannot be passed down through DNA and genes. So we have a body of knowledge which we gain after we're born, which is really a cultural knowledge. You learn it as an individual, but it's passed on. That's really what we need to survive, and if it wasn't fun to learn that, we wouldn't learn it. So, for some reason, it's ingrained in us that play is fun, and play is modelling what we see around us. In school I did playful learning. I think it's natural.

I think of the expansion of your awareness of things around you as relating to a bubble. Everything within the bubble I know and understand and it's part of my world. Outside, I haven't learned yet, but I may be aware of it. That bubble expands as you grow. One year when I was about thirteen or fourteen, I became really aware of that growth. Before that you're

> *not even aware of your own growth. You're just learning, and the things you know are all you know. But eventually you become aware of your own process of learning which is kind of interesting. It's sort of a meta-awareness. It was interesting to me, to become aware of myself and I still always feel like there are things that I'm aware of which are still not inside my bubble, and I'm still growing. I follow my curiosity and then bring it into the bubble. I don't purposely try to study things that I'm not interested in.*

Why don't we have schools today that allow tremendous amounts of individual freedom to follow curiosity? Why do we have schools today that have not internalized the basic notion that an individual has, from earliest childhood, a world view, and that each individual hungers constantly to expand that world view, to expand the size of their bubble, to bring what is outside their bubble in, to refine their perception of the world. To learn.

I think one reason our schools do not reflect what I think is self-evident is that for a long time, we needed a different type of school. We needed schools with rigid curricula for the industrial age. We have not always been in the age of information. We have not always been in the post-industrial age. Only an instant ago, historically, we were struggling to build an industrial society. In order to do that, we had to mold an industrial human being. We had to take partially formed children and channel their creativity into narrow fields, so that the society became in many ways more homogeneous, so that we could work together in ways that did not always allow for individual development. We had to create a curriculum that insured that everyone, everywhere, had the same "training," a word we don't look at too kindly anymore. We had to forget our fundamental principles while dealing with the training of students. We took away individual freedom and responsibility. We took away their ability to govern themselves, and their freedom of speech. We put them in institutions that compromised their rights at ever turn, so that "due process" and "democracy" were just words in an eleventh grade classroom. We did this in order to get a certain result, which we wanted in a different era. Unfortunately, that result led to a curriculum that is established now in a powerful bureaucracy that resists fundamental changes with all its strength. This is how one of our graduates describes the difference between SVS and most other schools.

> *I didn't look upon going to Sudbury Valley as a radical thing. I looked upon it as what the norm should be and thought that the rest of the school systems were radical because they were radical departures from almost any other situation that any human being goes through in the United States in their lives. Once we reach eighteen, we're all in control of ourselves within the structure of the law in the U.S. We are not placed in the position where legally we have to be in a building "x" number of hours a day and we have to listen to someone.*

Today, the industrial age is ending. We don't need to produce factory workers anymore. We don't need people to be like robots. Robots can be like robots. We don't need people to be like machines. We have computers, which are machines. In an industrial society, armies of workers were needed for production. The machinery of the industrial society needed masses of mass-produced men: the machinery in a post-industrial society is much more sophisticated. In a post industrial society, routine tasks are done by information-processing machines. We can free the mind of the child and the adult. We have an era in which the ability to figure things out for yourself is all important. We have an era in which more and more and more people are forging new paths, in which most of us are engaged in occupations that couldn't have been guessed at forty years ago, and most of our children will engage in occupations that we can't guess at now. Unfortunately, most schools have not even begun to realize the diversity that will be needed in the next generations. We need people who have developed their brains as much as possible. It is no longer necessary to make sure they have learned the same things as their peers.

In 1968, the post-industrial age was a gleam on the horizon. Now it is fact. But it was already clear in 1968 that the educated person of the future had to be comfortable to explore and to innovate, and to constantly build new models of the world.

Sudbury Valley was the school for the future. Now it is the school for the present.

What is the school like? How do these principles get put into practice.

First, let me set the stage. The school enrolls students from the age of four up. No one is too old, although most of our students are nineteen or younger. The people in the school, no matter what age they are, are each doing what they want to do. Usually that means that some people are doing things with others, who can be of the most various of ages, and some people are doing things alone. Usually it means that most people are doing things not done in most other schools, and some are doing things that are done in other schools with a very unusual intensity and concentration. It more often means that children are teaching adults than that adults are teaching children, but most often people are learning and unconscious that "learning" is taking place. Doing what they choose to do is the common theme; learning is the by-product. It is first and foremost a place where students are free to follow their inner dictates. They are free to do what we all do when we have the time to, and what we all find to be most satisfactory — they play. Play is the most serious pursuit at Sudbury Valley. This is not an accident. Psychologists pretty much agree these days that allowing the mind to roam freely has the most potential for mind-expansion. In fact, when we talk about our most creative moments, we describe them as "playing with new ideas." This is a process that cannot be forced. Creativity can only grow in such freedom. Some people play at games, and some play at things we who have more traditional educations are more comfortable with — writing or art or mathematics or music. But we are quite clear at Sudbury Valley that it is doing what *you* want to that counts! We have no curriculum and place no value on one pursuit over another. The reason that we are secure in feeling this way is that we constantly see that people play more and more sophisticated "games," explore more and more deeply, that they constantly expand their knowledge of the world, and their ability to handle themselves in it.

Children who play constantly do not draw an artificial line between work and play. In fact, you could say that they are working constantly if you did not see the joy in the place, a joy most usually identified with the pursuit of avocations.

I would like to talk about some of the other aspects of an atmosphere that encourages individuality to such an extent.

The school has about twenty-five rooms, in two separate buildings. On an average rainy day it is teeming with activity. The rooms are small and large, many are special purpose rooms, like shops and labs, but most are furnished like rather shabby living or dining rooms in homes: lots of sofas, easy chairs, and tables. Lots of people sitting around talking, reading, and playing games. On an average rainy day — quite different from a beautiful suddenly snowy day, or a warm spring or fall day — most people are inside. But there will also be more than a few who are outside in the rain, and later will come in dripping and trying the patience of the few people inside who think the school should perhaps be a "dry zone." There may be people in the photolab developing or printing pictures they have taken. There may be a karate class, or just some people playing on mats in the dance room. Someone may be building a bookshelf in the woodworking shop in the barn — or fashioning chain mail armor and discussing medieval history. There are almost certainly a few people, either together or separate, making music of one kind or another, and others listening to music of one kind or another. You might find a French class, or Latin, or algebra. You will find adults in groups that include kids, or maybe just talking with one student. It would be most unusual if there were not people playing a computer game somewhere, or chess; a few people doing some of the school's administrative work in the office — while others hang around just enjoying the atmosphere of an office where interesting people are always making things happen; there will be people engaged in role-playing games; other people may be rehearsing a play — it might be original, it might be a classic. They may intend production or just momentary amusement. People will be trading stickers and trading lunches. There will probably be people selling things. If you are lucky, someone will be selling cookies they baked at home and brought in to earn money. Sometimes groups of kids have cooked something to sell in order to raise money for an activity — perhaps they need to buy a new kiln, or want to go on a trip. An intense conversation will probably be in progress in the smoking room, and others in other places. A group in the kitchen may be cooking — maybe pizza or apple pie. Always, either in the art room or in any one of many other places, people will be drawing. In the art room they might also be sewing, or painting, and some are quite likely to be working with clay, either on the wheel or by hand. Always there are groups talking, and always there are people quietly reading here and there.

One of the things most adults notice first about Sudbury Valley is the ease of communication. People, no matter what their age, look right at each other, and treat each other with tremendous consideration and easy respect. Fear is absent. There is a comfortable air of self-confidence, the confidence normal to people pursuing the goals they set themselves. Things are almost never quiet, and there is (to an outsider) an exhausting intensity, but the activity is not chaotic or frenetic. Visitors speak of a feeling of a certain order, even though it is clearly a place full of enthusiasm.

The students at Sudbury Valley are "doin' what comes natur'ly." But they are not necessarily choosing what comes easily. A close look discovers that everyone is challenging themselves; that every kid is acutely aware of their own weaknesses and strengths, and extremely likely to be working hardest on their weaknesses. If their weaknesses are social, they are very unlikely to be stuck away in a quiet room with a book. And if athletics are hard, they are likely to be outdoors playing basketball. Along with the ebullient good spirits, there is an underlying seriousness — even the six year olds know that they, and only they, are responsible for their education. They have been given the gift of tremendous trust, and they understand that this gift is as big a responsibility as it is a delight. They are acutely aware that very young people are not given this much freedom or this much responsibility almost anywhere in the world. But growing up shouldering this responsibility makes for a very early confidence in your own abilities — you get, as one graduate says, a "track record." Self-motivation is never even a question. That's all there is. An ex-student has described some of these effects:

> *There are a lot of things about Sudbury Valley that I think are on a personal level, that build your character, things that perhaps enable you to learn better, that public school students never have a chance to achieve. When you're responsible for your own time, and spend it the way that you want to, you tend to put a lot more enthusiasm into what you do, instead of being a lethargic lump that's molded*

> *and prodded into a certain direction. And when you end up the way you want to end up, you know you've been responsible for it. It's a lot more rewarding, I think, than when you end up the way somebody else wants you to end up.*

Who are the kids in this school? Are they chosen for creativity, intelligence, or perhaps some other standard? It is a private school — does that mean it appeals to only the well-to-do? Admission is on a first come, first served basis, and we have never been full. That means that the students in this school consist of everyone who wants to come whose parents will allow them to. It includes the cerebral and the super-active, the "regular" and the "zeroed-in", the full gamut of possibilities. Most of the families who choose to send their children to SVS are looking for something they wish they could find in public schools, but cannot: simple freedom for their children to develop according to their own timetables and their own desires.

Is it perfection? Hardly. But it is tremendously stimulating and exciting.

Sudbury Valley is a functioning democracy. There is a School Meeting which meets once a week to take care of all the management work, either by directly accomplishing it or by delegating it. Each student and each staff member has one vote, and the meetings are run in an extremely orderly fashion. The School Meeting makes a budget each year, ever so carefully, because the tuition is low and it is important to be thrifty and not to spend money needlessly. Yes, kids know this, and are much harsher judges of what is — or is not — a necessary expense. The School Meeting passes every rule, often after weeks of soul-searching debate. This includes the rule about "no littering", the rules about not ever setting a foot in the pond, the rules that govern which rooms eating is ok in, and which ones you can play the radio in, as well as the rules protecting individual rights. It is up to the School Meeting to approve groups organizing to pursue special interests that want budgets or space. Anyone who thinks that young children are not wise about these matters need only attend a few such school meetings.

The School Meeting delegates some tasks to sub-groups or to people elected by them to carry out certain responsibilities. A sub-group called the Public Relations Committee is composed of people interested in the school's p.r. work; others serve on the school's Bookkeeping Committee. Someone is elected to see to the Grounds' Maintenance. Another person is elected to keep computer records of all of the judicial activities. All of us are totally accountable and totally aware of our accountability every minute. The School Meeting also debates candidates for staff, votes on them in an all day, school-wide, secret balloting, and awards contracts according to needs determined by this balloting. There is no tenure.

There is also a sub-group of the school meeting set up to deal with rule infractions. It is called the judicial committee, and its function is to investigate written complaints about possible rule violations, and to see that justice is served, being constantly careful about due process. Does it work? You bet it does. Peer justice is amazingly effective. Rules are often broken, but the culprits are usually good natured about both admitting what has happened and accepting their punishment.

We have no curriculum. If you send your children to this school, however, there are some certainties about what they learn. They learn how to debate, and how to ask for what they want, and see to it that they get it. They learn to ponder ethical questions. They learn how to concentrate: they can focus on things the way few adults that I know can, and this gives results. The same focus that a five year old puts into sand castles a seven year old puts into drawing, an eleven year old into making a gingerbread house, a nine year into chess, a twelve year old into Dungeons and Dragons, an eight year old into climbing forty feet up in the beech tree, a fifteen year old into writing a story, a seventeen year old into making armor, or an eighteen year old into preparing for graduation. That kind of preparation will serve them well in each and every pursuit they choose as adults.

Right now there is a group of about eight or nine young men, aged about twelve up to nineteen, who have been working together and alone for periods of time up to two years building chain-mail armor. It is a perfect example of what happens at SVS. No adult in the school inspired them and in fact no adult in the school helped them. They have created vests, helmets, and gloves. What they start with is a spool of wire. They must take it and turn it into thousands of tiny open circles, by wrapping it carefully around a thin metal dowel, or several dowels of various thinness, and cutting the coil into many open circles. Then with pliers and infinite patience, they weave the circles into beautiful garments, often using gold wire to weave in designs. They know a lot about history, but they also know a lot about how to determine an interest and follow it, about how to work long and hard for a goal that may not mean a thing to anyone else but enriches the person who is striving for it.

The results of this lifetime of freedom? Here are some descriptions from former students:

> *I feel as though the process and the environment which is created at Sudbury Valley is a really valuable one. It's tragic to me that people can come through all their educational years in this culture and not realize that we're practically like gods — we can do so much. People aren't in touch with the fact that they really have so much power and so much ability. What I think is magical about Sudbury Valley and so wonderful is just that so many people who go through there can feel that sense of control over their lives when they leave. No matter what they do afterward, they know that*

> *can exist because they experience it there at the school.*

> *Because I wasn't forced to learn stupid things like reading, writing and 'rithmetic, I had more of a well rounded, social view — all those things that you're supposed to learn about in college, the reason you go to college, to get rounded, I had done before college. I learned about art, about literature, and the sciences when I was younger. I wanted to learn them because I wasn't spending all my time doing stupid things. Sudbury Valley was a good school and it was an enjoyable place to grow up because you grew up academically and socially and physically all at the same time. It didn't come in stages. I realize more and more each year what I got from the school.*

This is a school for the post industrial age. It is a school for the age of de-centralization and individualization. It is a school that gets kids ready for a world that is changing with breathtaking speed, where the biggest need people have is the need to adapt to new situations, to learn new material, to work independently, to be able to use their leisure time in ways that give them satisfaction. This is how one of our former students describes her abilities:

> *One thing that strikes me is that I know people who say to me, "Oh, I wouldn't know what to do with my time if I had a month off." And I think "What are you talking about? Just use your time." I never feel that if the structure in my life was lost, what am I going to do? I*

> *don't feel lost. My ego doesn't fall apart in chaos if I don't have a schedule. I just live. I make my time what I want it to be. I never wonder what I would do without structure imposed upon me from the outside?" So many people I work with talk like that. Even about my job: in my job, we're alone most of the day, most of the time. I'm a social worker in a hospital setting and we're on our own to make our own schedules and get our work done. A lot of people come here and don't know how to do that. They say, "Well, I don't know how to structure. This day is too unstructured for me. I won't get my work done because I don't know how to balance my day to get it done." And that I can't fathom. That never happens to me. I wonder how I'm going to get my work done, but I appreciate having the freedom to organize my day the way I want to.*

A lot of people think that this sort of school will need tremendous numbers of adults running around making sure that each student's needs are met and easing the way for everyone. In practice this is just the opposite of what we need. We operate with a staff to student ratio of about one to fifteen. And that gives us plenty of staff. Everyone is a teacher and everyone is a self-educator. Mostly what kids need from adults is very little instruction, but willing guidance towards their expressed needs. They want older people around who are successful in the world and who have interests and activities which afford them satisfaction, and pursue them with dedication. What the kids at Sudbury Valley School seem to look for in staff is depth of character; they want people who have looked into themselves and can listen and understand when kids go through the same processes. They want older and more experienced friends to turn to, whether they are older students or adults. They want to have resources to turn to but not to feel obligated to use any particular resources. In other words, wisdom is at a premium. The adults are the people with the larger world views to turn to as yours expands.

How does this education end? There is no magic moment when it is over; the idea that permeates the school is that you are a learner every day of your life. But at some time most students begin to feel that they want to move on to a different kind of situation. Perhaps they want to try their wings at living independently. Perhaps they want to continue to pursue their interests in an institution, such as a university, where there is a larger group of people interested in the same area as they are. Perhaps they are ready for an apprenticeship in the larger community, or perhaps they have honed a skill to such a point already that they are ready to pursue it full time. They may leave school to travel the world on a shoestring, or to become professional chefs, or to study fashion design, or to work hard to break into the music business. Here is someone's description of getting ready:

> *After a certain amount of time the school was something I had to be done with. I had to graduate. I had to go on and do something else. And that evolved slowly and at the right time, I think. I felt like it was time to graduate. It wasn't like I felt pressed. It came from inside and I was ready. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I was prepared to go out and do*

> *whatever it was. I don't think I had the confidence to go out until I was really ready. Suddenly, whether I knew what I was doing or not, I knew I had the confidence to go out and try and that I would do the best I could and let things happen the way they were going to happen. I don't "fail" by actually failing, like a guy testing a parachute might fail if he jumped off a big cliff. I would fail by throwing a brick tied to a parachute. If that brick hit the ground and broke, that was my failure. I would test the waters before I jumped, always. And so my failures were never catastrophic, they were just, "Well that parachute didn't work. I'm going to have to build another one." I still live my life that way. I don't throw all my eggs in one basket.*

Many who leave to go on to the next step in their lives leave with excitement, but most leave reluctantly too. Among the things they do *not* take with them are grades, transcripts, evaluations or lists of courses completed. What they do take is a firm conviction that they can do what they set out to do. We have found that Sudbury Valley students have what it takes to do very well. They have become used to working hard. They are used to working independently. They are used to overcoming difficulties. And they know who they are. They can describe their own strengths and weaknesses and their own methods for exploiting the strengths and overcoming the weaknesses. So they seem to be quite successful in their next pursuits. They get into the colleges they want to go to. Part of that is the process by which they decide to go to college. It is always to pursue an interest they are committed to, and they choose colleges where their interests will be met. But part of it is the impression they make when they interview. Each one has to talk their way in the door. Since they have spent years and years talking and arguing and thinking about real issues, so they are an amazingly articulate group.

Here are quotes from three of them describing college admissions and experiences:

> *I learned from Sudbury Valley how to voice my opinion and how to say what I want and that's what got me into college. I said to myself, 'I'm going to get myself in there one way or the other.' I was persistent and I did it.*
>
> *They took me because I talked, I showed that I wanted to be there and that I wasn't being forced to be there, that it was something I felt I had to do. I walked right in and talked to the Dean. I was really nervous about my interview; it was something I never did before. He said, "What can I tell you about the University?" and that was an instant shock. I was kind of blank for a second, then I said "Well, to tell you the honest truth, I've already made my decision to enter this school, so I think I know as much as I possibly should know about being a student here. What I think you should know is about me and why I want to be here." And he moved around in his chair, looked back at me and said "OK, go for it." And I went on and on and on and he said, "OK, why Criminal Justice?" And I told him about the Judicial Committee. I told him about the staff. I told him about everything. He said, "You know something? I'm going to call my office*

and I'm going to tell them." He told me right then and there, "You'll see your acceptance letter," and "I'll see you in the Fall." I said, 'Thank you very much.'

I looked for a college that had a heterogeneous population, as much as possible. They called it "diverse" in my day. I looked for a place that sort of promoted a certain amount of freedom for the students. The school that I went to had expectations but it didn't have a tremendous number of requirements, although I did apply to schools that had more requirements. I looked for places that had good departments in what I was interested in, in dance and in religion. I also looked for schools with good reputations. I visited them and felt the atmosphere and that kind of thing. I took out books from the library, read about the colleges, looked at how many stars they had, read what students had written about them, and visited. I was pretty careful. The interviews were the best feature of my applications I think, because kids from Sudbury Valley are used to talking. They talk a lot. Coming from that school and having to explain it, gives you sort of a leg up. You present as responsible, as articulate, as thinking. You're used to talking to adults.

You're already used to having classes not meet all day every day, so that when you get to college and classes meet twice a week for an hour and you have free time, you know what to do with it, you know how to handle that, it's not a shock. You're used to intensity in classes.

> *You're used to designing your own schedule. You're used to setting aside time to study because no one's going to do it for you. You have a lot of free time. You learn how to balance that. That comes very easy. What's a little bit hard at first is tests. It takes about one semester and that's it. You're fine.*
>
> *I decided to go to college because I wanted to do more music with other people who were interested in classical music. That was the primary motivation. The secondary motivation was that I wanted to see what it was like to be around a university and to be around other people who were interested in the same academic things, and to have a rich amount of academic things going on around me that I could participate in if I wanted to or talk to people about if I wanted to. I felt it was something that would be really different from Sudbury Valley in the sense that instead of being one person interested in something, if I was interested in something in college, I figured that there would be lots of other people around who were interested in it too. There would be lots of people to talk to. It turned out that as I got more interested in math, there weren't very many people I could talk to, because where I was there just weren't many people who were that good at math.*

And here is a graduate describing *not* going to college:

> *I didn't go to college because I didn't know what I wanted to do in college. My parents had the money set aside. I could have gone to any college. I just didn't know what I would have wanted to learn. Anytime I wanted to learn something, I could picture what I wanted to learn. Like when I wanted to learn refrigeration. I could see these guys working on refrigerators. I knew they were getting a lot of money. It looked like they were having a lot of fun. So I wanted to learn how to do refrigeration. I had a goal. I didn't quit my job and go to refrigeration school. I bought a book. And when I didn't have the book, I asked the refrigeration guys what they were doing. Most guys, if you ask them, they want to tell you. And the more I could learn, the more questions I could ask that made sense, the more interested they would be in telling me. Pretty soon I was doing it. I learned it in a matter of months. Then I got better and better as I did more and more and went into more complicated problems. Whenever I wanted to learn something, I always found I could learn it real quick, so why go to college?*

Why is such a wonderful school not the norm? Shouldn't SVS already have been copied in a million different places? The answer isn't so simple — or maybe it is. The idea of total freedom for children is very threatening to most people. The kinds of objections that are raised are: "But there are *some* basics — how do you insure that each child learns them?" We at Sudbury Valley are not so certain that there are any basics, but we are certain that our students are in an environment that is real, that is totally linked to the larger community, and that if there are things everyone should learn, the kids in the school surely know it as well as the adults, and it is up to them to insure that they learn it. Often people are angry when they learn that most students can learn all of basic math in just twenty hours of classroom work. They feel cheated because they spent years and years of doing repetitive mathematics either because they hated it and weren't interested and were bad at it or because they learned it fast but were told they had to re-drill, re-drill and re-drill some more or they would forget everything. Now I ask you, would you really forget it if it were truly basic?

But what these people really mean is, "If kids are not controlled by rigid authorities, won't they be out of control?" That is the *Lord of the Flies* objection: that children that are free will turn swiftly into cruel creatures. But our children are not in a hostile, terminally stressful environment; they are free in an orderly, rule-respecting society. Yes, they are free to change the rules, but only when they convince everyone else the changes are wise. They are free surrounded by models of the way people behave who wish to maintain all their freedoms.

I want to end with one more description of life at Sudbury Valley translated into adulthood: This young man, as a boy, worked with about a dozen other kids, day after day, month after month, on creating a miniature society, out of plasticene, modelled precisely on cultures they were interested in, all to scale.

> *Working in plasticene at Sudbury Valley was a fascination of creating. You were creating things that you couldn't have in real*

life yourself, maybe, but you could still make them, and by making them, you could have them. I think it was probably one of the most intense things I'd ever done. Villages would evolve. Sometimes you'd be building a gold mining community. Sometimes it would be a bunch of towns with hotels and saloons. Then you'd have battles and wars. You'd be building tanks and airplanes, just one thing after another. But it always involved a lot of buildings, a lot of vehicles, a lot of people and you'd make all the stuff. Then you would enact various scenes with them.

Well, I think about it every now and then, and I'm doing exactly the same things now. Except I'm doing them now in real life. I'm building a factory and making machines and talking to people all day long. Same exact thing. And very intensely. We talk about how to build the things, how to talk to the customers on the phone, all that sort of stuff. Day in and day out, the same exact thing I was doing in plasticene.

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